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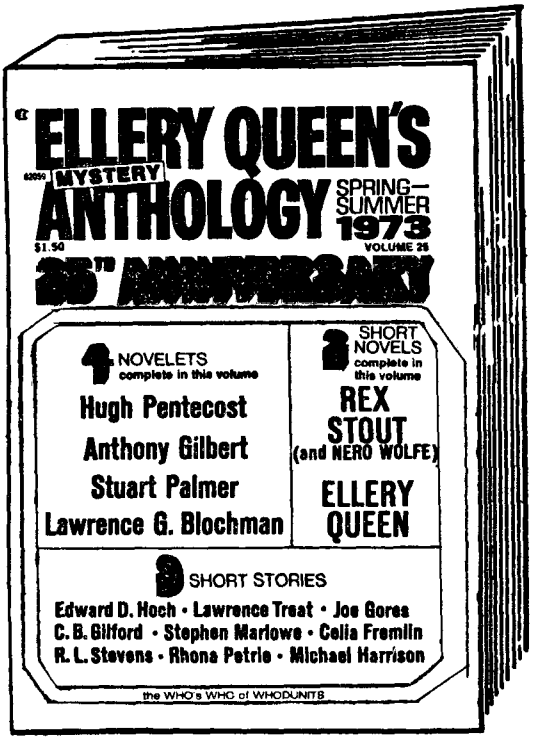

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a *NEW* Harley Quin story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

first publication in the United States

This is the first brand-new short story (really, a novelet) by Agatha Christie in too many years. The last new story by Dame Agatha to appear in EQMM was "Dressmaker's Doll," in our June 1959 issue—exactly 14 years ago! As we said, too many years . . .

"The Harlequin Tea Set" is a new Harley Quin story. Harley Quin—the mystical detective who seems always to be "passing by" when there is trouble or tragedy impending. Harley Quin—"someone who might turn up anywhere and who, if he did turn up, was always an announcement that something was going to happen." From words that Mr. Quin utters, Mr. Satterthwaite gets ideas. He sees things that otherwise he would not see, imagines things that otherwise he would not imagine, finds out things that otherwise would elude him. Mr. Quin is, in a phrase, a detective-maker, and Mr. Satterthwaite is that rare, perhaps unique, "Watson" who becomes a detective in his own right.

And there is one more aspect of the Harley Quin stories that, so far as we know, has never been noted and commented on. The Harley Quin adventures-in-detection are, as distinguished from "dying message" stories, what might be called "living message" stories. You will see what we mean when you read Dame Agatha's newest story of love and death—and other crucial matters . . .

"Q"

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THE HARLEQUIN TEA SET

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

Mr. Satterthwaite clucked twice in vexation. Whether right in his assumption or not, he was more and more convinced that cars nowadays broke down far more frequently than they used to do. The only cars he trusted were old friends who had survived the test of time. They had their little idiosyncrasies, but you knew about those, provided for them, fulfilled their wants before they became too acute.

But new cars! Full of new gadgets, different kinds of windows, an instrument panel newly and differently arranged, handsome in their glistening wood but being unfamiliar, your groping hand hovered uneasily over fog lights, windshield wipers, choke, et cetera. All these things with knobs in a place you didn't expect them. And when your gleaming new purchase failed in performance, your local garage uttered the intensely irritating words, "Teething troubles. Splendid car, sir, these roadsters Super Superbos. All the latest accessories. But bound to have their teething troubles, you know." As though a car was a baby.

But Mr. Satterthwaite, being now at an advanced age, was strongly of the opinion that a new car ought to be fully adult. Tested, inspected, and its teething troubles already dealt with before it came into its purchaser's possession.

Mr. Satterthwaite was on his way to pay a weekend visit to friends in the country. His new car had already, on the way from London, given certain symptoms of discomfort, and was now drawn up in a garage waiting for the diagnosis and how long it would take before he could resume progress toward his destination. His chauffeur was in consultation with a mechanic. Mr. Satterthwaite sat, striving for patience. He had assured his hosts, on the telephone the night before, that he would be arriving in good time for tea. He would reach Doverton Kingsbourne, he assured them, well before four.

He clucked again in irritation and tried to turn his thoughts to something pleasant. It was no good sitting here in a state of acute irritation, frequently consulting his wrist watch, clucking once more and giving,

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he had to realize, a very good imitation of a hen pleased with its prowess in laying an egg.

Yes. Something pleasant. Yes, now hadn't there been something—something he had noticed as they were driving along. Not very long ago. Something that he had seen through the window which had pleased and excited him. But before he had had time to think about it, the car's misbehavior had become more pronounced and a rapid visit to the nearest service station had been inevitable.

What was it he had seen? On the left—no, on the right. Yes, on the right as they drove slowly through the village street. Next door to a post office. Yes, he was quite sure of that. Next door to a post office because the sight of the post office had given him the idea of telephoning to the Addisons to break the news that he might be slightly late in his arrival. The post office. A village post office. And next to it—yes, definitely, next to it, next door or if not next door the door after.

Something that had stirred old memories, and he had wanted—just what was it that he had wanted? Oh, dear, it would come to him presently. It was mixed up with a color. Several colors. Yes, a color or colors. Or a word. Some definite word that had stirred memories, thoughts, pleasures gone by, excitement, recalling something that had been vivid and alive. Something in which he himself had not only seen but observed. No, he had done more. He had taken part. Taken part in what, and why, and where? All sorts of places. The answer came quickly at the last thought. All sorts of places.

On an island? In Corsica? At Monte Carlo watching the croupier spinning his roulette wheel? A house in the country? All sorts of places. And he had been there, and someone else. Yes, someone else. It all tied up with that. He was getting there at last. If he could just— He was interrupted at that moment by the chauffeur coming to the window with the garage mechanic in tow.

"Won't be long now, sir," the chauffeur assured Mr. Satterthwaite cheerfully. "Matter of ten minutes or so. Not more."

"Nothing seriously wrong," said the mechanic, in a low, hoarse, country voice. "Teething troubles, as you might say."

Mr. Satterthwaite did not cluck this time. He gnashed his teeth. A phrase he had often read in books and which in old age he seemed to have got into the habit of doing himself, owing, perhaps, to the slight looseness of his upper plate. Really,

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teething trouble! Toothache. Teeth gnashing. False teeth. One's whole life centered, he thought, about teeth.

"Doverton Kingsbourne's only a few miles away," said the chauffeur, "and they've a taxi here. You could go on in that, sir, and I'd bring the car along later as soon as it's fixed up."

"No!" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He said the word explosively and both the chauffeur and the mechanic looked startled. Mr. Satterthwaite's eyes were sparkling. His voice was clear and decisive. Memory had come to him.

"I propose," he said, "to walk along the road we have just come by. When the car is ready, you will pick me up there. The Harlequin Café, I think it is called."

"It's not much of a place, sir," the mechanic advised.

"That is where I shall be," said Mr. Satterthwaite, speaking with a kind of regal autocracy.

He walked off briskly. The two men stared after him.

"Don't know what's got into him," said the chauffeur. "Never seen him like that before."

The village of Kingsbourne Ducis did not live up to the old world grandeur of its name. It was a smallish village consisting of one street. A few houses. Shops that were dotted rather unevenly, sometimes betraying the fact that they were houses which had been turned into shops or that they were shops which now existed as houses without any industrial intentions.

It was not particularly old world or beautiful. It was just simple and rather unobtrusive. Perhaps that was why, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, that dash of brilliant color had caught his eye. Ah, here he was at the post office. The post office was a simply functioning post office with a mail box outside, a display of some newspapers and some postcards, and surely, next to it—yes, there was the sign up above. The Harlequin Café.

A sudden qualm struck Mr. Satterthwaite. Really, he was getting too old. He had fancies. Why should that one word stir his heart? *Harlequin.*

The mechanic at the service station had been quite right. It did not look like a place in which one would really be tempted to have a meal. A snack perhaps. A morning coffee. Then why? But he suddenly realized why. Because the café—or perhaps one could better put it as the house that sheltered the café—was in two portions.

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One side of it had small tables with chairs around them ready for patrons who came here to eat. But the other side was a shop. A shop that sold china. It was not an antique shop. It had no little shelves of glass vases or mugs. It was a shop that sold modern goods, and the show window that gave on the street was at the present moment housing every shade of the rainbow. A tea set of largish cups and saucers, each one of a different color. Blue, red, yellow, green, pink, purple.

Really, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, a wonderful show of color. No wonder it had struck his eye as the car had passed slowly beside the pavement, looking ahead for any sign of a garage or service station. It was labeled with a large card: *A Harlequin Tea Set.*

It was the word *harlequin*, of course, which had remained fixed in Mr. Satterthwaite's mind, although just far enough back in his mind so that it had been difficult to recall it. The gay colors. The harlequin colors. And he had thought, wondered, had the absurd but exciting idea that in some way here was a call to him. To him specially. Here, perhaps, eating a meal or purchasing cups and saucers might be his own old friend, Mr. Harley Quin.

How many years was it since he had last seen Mr. Quin? A large number of years. Was it the day he had seen Mr. Quin walking away from him down a country lane? Lovers' Lane they had called it. He had always expected to see Mr. Quin again, once a year at least. Possibly twice a year. But no. That had not happened.

And so today he had had the wonderful and surprising idea that here, in the village of Kingsbourne Ducis, he might once again find Mr. Harley Quin.

"Absurd of me," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "quite absurd of me. Really, the ideas one has as one gets old!"

He had missed Mr. Quin. Missed something that had been one of the most exciting things in the late years of his life. Someone who might turn up anywhere and who, if he did turn up, was always an announcement that something was going to happen. Something that was going to happen to him.

No, that was not quite right. Not *to* him, but through him. That was the exciting part. Just from the words that Mr. Quin might utter. Words. From things he might show him, ideas would come to Mr. Satterthwaite. He would see things, he would imagine things, he would find out things. He

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would deal with something that needed to be dealt with. And opposite him would sit Mr. Quin, perhaps smiling approval. Something that Mr. Quin said would start the flow of ideas, but the active person would be he himself. He, Mr. Satterthwaite. The man with so many old friends. A man among whose friends had been duchesses, an occasional bishop, people who counted.

Especially, he had to admit, people who had counted in the social world. Because, after all, Mr. Satterthwaite had always been a snob. He had liked duchesses, he had liked knowing old families, families who had represented the landed gentry of England for several generations. And he had had, too, an interest in young people not necessarily socially important. Young people who were in trouble, who were in love, who were unhappy, who needed help. Because of Mr. Quin, Mr. Satterthwaite was enabled to give help.

And now, like an idiot, he was looking into an unprepossessing village café and a shop for modern china and tea sets and casseroles no doubt.

"All the same," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself, "I must go in. Now that I've been foolish enough to walk back here, I must go in just—well, just in case. They'll be longer, I expect, doing the car than they say. It will be more than ten minutes. Just in case there is anything interesting inside."

He looked once more at the window full of china. He appreciated suddenly that it was good china. Well made. A good modern product. He looked back into the past, remembering. The Duchess of Leith, he remembered. What a wonderful old lady she had been. How kind she had been to her maid on the occasion of a very rough sea voyage to the island of Corsica. She had ministered to her with the kindliness of a ministering angel and only on the next day had she resumed her autocratic, bullying manner which the domestics of those days had seemed able to stand without any sign of rebellion.

Maria. Yes, that's what the Duchess' name had been. Dear old Maria Leith. Ah, well. She had died some years ago. But she had had a harlequin breakfast set, he remembered. Yes. Big round cups in different colors. Black. Yellow, red, and a particularly pernicious shade of puce. Puce, he thought, must have been a favorite color of hers. She had had a Rockingham tea set, he remembered, in which the predominating color had been puce decorated with gold.

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"Ah," sighed Mr. Satterthwaite, "those were the days. Well, I suppose I'd better go in. Perhaps order a cup of coffee or something. It will be very full of milk, I expect, and possibly already sweetened. But still, one has to pass the time."

He went in. The café side was practically empty. It was early, Mr. Satterthwaite supposed, for people to want cups of tea. And anyway, very few people did want cups of tea nowadays. Except, that is, occasionally elderly people in their own homes. There was a young couple in the far window and two women gossiping at a table against the back wall.

"I said to her," one of them was saying, "I said you can't do that sort of thing. No, it's not the sort of thing that I'll put up with, and I said the same to Henry and he agreed with me."

It shot through Mr. Satterthwaite's mind that Henry must have rather a hard life and that no doubt he had found it always wise to agree, whatever was put up to him. A most unattractive woman with a most unattractive friend. He turned his attention to the other side of the building, murmuring, "May I look around?"

There was quite a pleasant woman in charge and she said, "Oh, yes, sir. We've got a good stock at present."

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at the colored cups, picked up one or two of them, examined the milk jug, picked up a china zebra and considered it, examined some ashtrays of a fairly pleasing pattern. He heard chairs being pushed back and, turning his head, noted that the two middle-aged women still discussing former grievances had paid their bill and were now leaving the shop.

As they went out of the door, a tall man in a dark suit came in. He sat down at the table which they had just vacated. His back was to Mr. Satterthwaite, who thought that he had an attractive back. Lean, strong, well muscled, but rather dark and sinister-looking because there was very little light in the shop.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked back again at the ashtrays. "I might buy an ashtray so as not to cause a disappointment to the shop owner," he thought. As he did so, the sun came out suddenly.

He had not realized that the shop had looked dim because of the lack of sunshine. The sun must have been under a cloud for some time. It had clouded over, he remembered, at about the time they had got to the service station. But now there was this sudden burst of sunlight. It caught up the colors of

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the china through a colored glass window of somewhat ecclesiastical pattern which must, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, have been left over in the original Victorian house.

The sun came through the window and lit up the dingy café. In some curious way it also lit up the back of the man who had just sat down there. Instead of a dark black silhouette, there was now a festoon of colors. Red and blue and yellow. And suddenly Mr. Satterthwaite realized that he was looking at exactly what he had hoped to find. His intuition had not played him false. He knew who had just come in and sat down there. He knew so well that he had no need to wait until he could look at the face.

He turned his back on the china, went back into the café, round the corner of the table, and sat down opposite the man who had just come in.

"Mr. Quin," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I knew somehow it was going to be you."

Mr. Quin smiled. "You always know so many things."

"It's a long time since I've seen you," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Does time matter?" said Mr. Quin.

"Perhaps not. You may be right. Perhaps not."

"May I offer you some refreshment?"

"Is there any refreshment to be had?" said Mr. Satterthwaite doubtfully. "I suppose you must have come in for that purpose."

"One is never quite sure of one's purpose, is one?" said Mr. Quin.

"I am so pleased to see you again," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I'd almost forgotten, you know. I mean forgotten the way you talk, the things you say. The things you make me think of, the things you make me do."

"I make you do? You are so wrong. You have always known yourself just what you wanted to do and why you want to do them and why you know so well that they have to be done."

"I only feel that when you are here."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Quin lightly. "I have nothing to do with it. I am just, as I've often told you, I am just passing by. That is all."

"Today you are passing by through Kingsbourne Ducis."

"And you are not passing by. You are going to a definite place. Am I right?"

"I'm going to see a very old friend. A friend I have not seen for a good many years. He's old now. Somewhat crippled. He

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has had one stroke. He has recovered from it quite well, but one never knows."

"Does he live by himself?"

"Not now, I am glad to say. His family have come back from abroad, what is left of his family that is. They have been living with him now for some months. I am glad to be able to see them again all together. Those, that's to say, that I have seen before, and those that I have not seen."

"You mean children?"

"Children and grandchildren." Mr. Satterthwaite sighed. Just for a moment he was sad that he had had no children and no grandchildren and no great-grandchildren himself. He did not usually regret it at all.

"They have some special Turkish coffee here," said Mr. Quin. "Really good of its kind. Everything else is, as you have guessed, rather unpalatable. But one can always have a cup of Turkish coffee, can one not? Let us have one because I suppose you will soon have to get on with your pilgrimage, or whatever it is."

In the doorway came a small black dog. He came and sat down by the table and looked up at Mr. Quin.

"Your dog?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Yes. Let me introduce you to Hermes." He stroked the black dog's head. "Coffee," he said. "Tell Ali."

The black dog walked from the table through a door at the back of the shop. They heard him give a short incisive bark. Presently he reappeared and with him came a young man with a very dark complexion, wearing an emerald green pullover.

"Coffee, Ali," said Mr. Quin. 'Two coffees."

"Turkish coffee. That's right, isn't it, sir?" He smiled and disappeared.

The dog sat down again.

"Tell me," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "tell me where you've been and what you have been doing and why I have not seen you for so long."

"I have just told you that time really means nothing. It is clear in my mind and I think it is clear in yours the occasion when we last met."

"A very tragic occasion," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I do not really like to think of it."

"Because of death? But death is not always a tragedy. I have told you that before."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "perhaps that death—the one we are both thinking of—was not a tragedy. But all the same—"

"But all the same it is life that really matters. You are quite right, of course," said Mr.

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Quin. "Quite right. It is life that matters. We do not want someone young, someone who is happy, or could be happy, to die. Neither of us wants that, do we? That is the reason why we must always save a life when the command comes."

"Have you a command for me?"

"Me—a command for you?" Harley Quin's long sad face brightened into its peculiarly charming smile. "I have no commands for *you*, Mr. Satterthwaite. I have never had commands. You yourself know things, see things, know what to do, do them. It has nothing to do with me."

"Oh, yes, it has," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "You're not going to change my mind on that point. But tell me. Where have you been during what it is too short to call time?"

"Well, I have been here and there. In different countries, different climates, different adventures. But mostly, as usual, just passing by. I think it is more for you to tell me not only what you have been doing but what you are going to do now. More about where you are going. Who you are going to meet. Your friends, what they are like."

"Of course I will tell you. I should enjoy telling you because I have been thinking about these friends I am going to. When you have not seen a family for a long time, when you have not been closely connected with them for many years, it is always a nervous moment when you are going to resume old friendships and old ties."

"You are so right," said Mr. Quin.

The Turkish coffee was brought in little cups of oriental pattern. Ali placed them with a smile and departed. Mr. Satterthwaite sipped approvingly.

"As sweet as love, as black as night, and as hot as hell. That is the old Arab phrase, isn't it?"

Harley smiled over his shoulder and nodded.

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I must tell you where I am going though what I am doing hardly matters. I am going to renew old friendships, to make acquaintance with the younger generation. Tom Addison, as I have said, is a very old friend of mine. We did many things together in our young days. Then, as often happens, life parted us. He was in the Diplomatic Service, went abroad for several foreign posts in turn. Sometimes I went and stayed with him, sometimes I saw him when he was home in England. One of his early posts was in Spain. He married a Spanish girl, a very beautiful,

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dark girl called Pilar. He loved her very much."

"They had children?"

"Two daughters. A fair-haired baby like her father, called Lily, and a second daughter, Maria, who took after her Spanish mother. I was Lily's godfather. Naturally, I did not see either of the children very often. Two or three times a year either I gave a party for Lily or went to see her at her school. She was a sweet and lovely person. Very devoted to her father and he was very devoted to her.

"But in between these meetings, these revivals of friendship, we went through some difficult times. My contemporaries and I had difficulties in meeting through the war years. Lily married a pilot in the Air Force. A fighter pilot. Until the other day I had even forgotten his name. Simon Gilliatt. Squadron Leader Gilliatt."

"He was killed in the war?"

"No, no. He came through safely. After the war he resigned from the Air Force and he and Lily went out to Kenya as so many did. They settled there and they lived very happily. They had a son, a little boy called Roland. Later when he was at school in England I saw him once or twice. The last time, I think, was when he was twelve years old. A nice boy. He had red hair like his father. I've not seen him since so I am looking forward to seeing him today. He is twenty-three—twenty-four now. Time goes on so."

"Is he married?"

"No. Well, not yet."

"Ah. Prospects of marriage?"

"Well, I wondered from something Tom Addison said in his letter. There is a girl cousin. The younger daughter Maria married the local doctor. I never knew her very well. It was rather sad. She died in childbirth. Her little girl was called Inez, a family name chosen by her Spanish grandmother. As it happens, I have only seen Inez once since she grew up. A dark Spanish type very much like her grandmother. But I am boring you with all this."

"No. I want to hear it. It is very interesting to me."

"I wonder why," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He looked at Mr. Quin with that slight air of suspicion which sometimes came to him.

"You want to know all about this family. Why?"

"So that I can picture it, perhaps, in my mind."

"Well, this house I am going to, Doverton Kingsbourne it is called. It is quite a beautiful old house. Not so spectacular as to invite tourists or to be open to

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visitors on special days. Just a quiet country house to live in by an Englishman who has served his country and comes back to enjoy a mellow life when the age of retirement comes. Tom was always fond of country life. He enjoyed fishing. He was a good shot and we had very happy days together in his family home of his boyhood.

"I spent many of my own holidays as a boy at Doverton Kingsbourne. And all through my life I have had that image in my mind. No place like Doverton Kingsbourne. No other house to touch it. Every time I drove near it I would make a detour and just pass to see the view through a gap in the trees of the long lane that runs in front of the house, glimpses of the river where we used to fish, and of the house itself. And I would remember all the things Tom and I did together. He has been a man of action. A man who has done things. And I—I have just been an old bachelor."

"You have been more than that," said Mr. Quin. "You have been a man who made friends, who had many friends, and who has served his friends well."

"Well, if I can think that. Perhaps you are being too kind."

"Not at all. You are very good company besides. The stories you can tell, the things you've seen, the places you have visited. The curious things that have happened in your life. You could write a whole book on them," said Mr. Quin.

"I should make you the main character in it if I did."

"No, you would not," said Mr. Quin. "I am the one who passes by. That is all. But go on. Tell me more."

"Well, this is just a family chronicle that I'm telling you. As I say, there were long periods when I did not see any of them. But they have been always my old friends. I saw Tom and Pilar until the time when Pilar died—she died rather young, unfortunately. Lily, my godchild, and Inez, the quiet doctor's daughter who lives in the village with her father—"

"How old is the daughter?"

"Inez is nineteen or twenty, I think. I shall be glad to make friends with her."

"So it is on the whole a happy chronicle?"

"Not entirely. Lily, my godchild—the one who went to Kenya with her husband—was killed there in an automobile accident. She left behind her a baby of barely a year old, little Roland. Simon, her husband, was quite broken-hearted. They were an unusually happy couple. However, the best thing happened to him that could

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happen, I suppose. He married again, a young widow who was the widow of a squadron leader, a friend of his and who also had been left with a baby the same age. Little Timothy and little Roland had only two or three months in age between them.

"Simon's marriage, I believe, has been quite happy though I've not seen them, of course, because they continued to live in Kenya. The boys were brought up like brothers. They went to the same school in England and spent their holidays usually in Kenya. I have not seen them, of course, for many years. Well, you know what has happened in Kenya. Some people have managed to stay on. Some people, friends of mine, have gone to Western Australia and have settled happily there with their families. Some have come home to this country.

"Simon Gilliatt and his wife and their two children left Kenya. It was not the same to them and so they came home and accepted the invitation that has always been given them and renewed every year by old Tom Addison. They have come, his son-in-law, his son-in-law's second wife, and the two children, now grown up boys, or rather, young men. They have come to live as a family and they are happy. Tom's other grandchild, Inez Horton, as I told you, lives in the village with her father, the doctor, and she spends a good deal of her time, I gather, at Doverton Kingsbourne with Tom Addison who is very devoted to his grand-daughter.

"They sound all very happy together there. He has urged me several times to come there and see. Meet them all again. And so I accepted the invitation. Just for a weekend. It will be sad in some ways to see dear old Tom again, somewhat crippled, with perhaps not a very long expectation of life but still cheerful and gay, as far as I can make out. And to see also the old house again. Doverton Kingsbourne. Tied up with all my boyish memories. When one has not lived a very eventful life, when nothing has happened to one personally, and that is true of me, the things that remain with you are the friends, the houses, and the things you did as a child and a boy and a young man. There is only one thing that worries me."

"You should not be worried. What is it that worries you?"

"That I might be—disappointed. The house one remembers, one has dreams of, when one might come to see it again it would not be as you remembered it or dreamed it. A new wing would have been added,

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the garden would have been altered, all sorts of things can have happened to it. It is a very long time, really, since I have been there."

"I think your memories will go with you," said Mr. Quin. "I am glad you are going there."

"I have an idea," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Come with me. Come with me on this visit. You need not fear you'll not be welcome. Dear Tom Addison is the most hospitable fellow in the world. Any friend of mine would immediately be a friend of his. Come with me. You must. I insist."

Making an impulsive gesture, Mr. Satterthwaite nearly knocked his coffee cup off the table. He caught it just in time.

At that moment the shop door was pushed open, ringing its old-fashioned bell as it did so. A middle-aged woman came in. She was slightly out of breath and looked somewhat hot. She was good-looking still with a head of auburn hair only just touched here and there with gray. She had that clear ivory-colored skin that so often goes with reddish hair and blue eyes, and she had kept her figure well. The newcomer glanced round the café and turned into the china shop.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you've still got some of the Harlequin cups."

"Yes, Mrs. Gilliatt, we had a new stock arrived in yesterday."

"Oh, I'm so pleased. I really have been very worried. I rushed down here. I took one of the boys' motorbikes. They'd gone off somewhere and I couldn't find either of them. But I really had to do something. There was an unfortunate accident this morning with some of the cups and we've got people arriving for tea and a party this afternoon. So if you can give me a blue and a green and perhaps I'd better have another red one as well in case. That's the worst of these different colored cups, isn't it?"

"Well, I know they do say as it's a disadvantage and you can't always replace the particular color you want."

Mr. Satterthwaite's head had gone over his shoulder now and he was looking with some interest at what was going on. Mrs. Gilliatt, the shop woman had said. But of course. He realized it now. This must be—he rose from his seat, half hesitating, and then took a few steps into the shop.

"Excuse me," he said, "but are you Mrs. Gilliatt from Doverton Kingsbourne?"

"Oh, yes. I am Beryl Gilliatt. Do you—I mean . . .?"

She looked at him, wrinkling her brows a little. An attractive

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woman. Mr. Satterthwaite thought Rather a hard face, perhaps, but competent. So this was Simon Gilliatt's second wife She hadn't the beauty of Lily, but she seemed an attractive woman, pleasant and efficient. Suddenly a smile came to Mrs. Gilliatt's face.

"I do believe—yes, of course. My father-in-law, Tom, has a photograph of you and you must be the guest we are expecting this afternoon. You must be Mr. Satterthwaite."

"Exactly," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "But I shall have to apologize for being so much later in arriving than I said. But unfortunately my car has had a breakdown. It's in the garage now being attended to."

"Oh, how miserable for you. What a shame. But it's not teatime yet. Don't worry. We've put it off anyway. As you probably heard, I ran down to replace a few cups which unfortunately got swept off a table this morning. Whenever one has anyone to lunch or tea or dinner, something like that always happens."

"There you are, Mrs. Gilliatt," said the shop woman. "I'll wrap them up in here. Shall I put them in a box for you?"

"No, if you'll just put some paper around them and put them in this shopping bag of mine, they'll be quite all right."

"If you are returning to Doverton Kingsbourne," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I could give you a lift in my car. It will be arriving from the garage any moment now."

"That's very kind of you. I wish really I could accept. But I've simply got to take the motorbike back. The boys will be miserable without it. They're going somewhere this evening."

"Let me introduce you," said Mr. Satterthwaite. He turned toward Mr. Quin, who had risen to his feet and was now standing quite near. "This is an old friend of mine, Mr. Harley Quin, whom I have just happened to run across here. I've been trying to persuade him to come along to Doverton Kingsbourne. Would it be possible, do you think, for Tom to put up another guest for tonight?"

"Oh, I'm sure it would be quite all right," said Beryl Gilliatt. "I'm sure he'd be delighted to see another friend of yours. Perhaps it's a friend of his as well."

"No," said Mr. Quin, "I've never met Mr. Addison though I've often heard my friend, Mr. Satterthwaite, speak of him."

"Well, then, do let Mr. Satterthwaite bring you. We should be delighted."

"I am very sorry," said Mr. Quin. "Unfortunately, I have

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another engagement. Indeed"—he looked at his watch—"I must start for it immediately. I am late already, which is what comes of meeting old friends."

"Here you are, Mrs. Gilliatt," said the saleswoman. "It'll be quite all right, I think, in your bag."

Beryl Gilliatt put the parcel carefully into the bag she was carrying, then said to Mr. Satterthwaite, "Well, see you presently. Tea isn't until quarter past five, so don't worry. I'm so pleased to meet you at last, having heard so much about you always both from Simon and from my father-in-law."

She said a hurried goodbye to Mr. Quin and went out of the shop.

"Bit of a hurry she's in, isn't she," said the shop woman, "but she's always like that. Gets through a lot in a day, I'd say."

The sound of the motorcycle outside was heard as it revved up.

"Quite a character, isn't she?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"It would seem so," said Mr. Quin.

"And I really can't persuade you?"

"I'm only passing by," said Mr. Quin.

"And when shall I see you again?"

"Oh, it will not be very long," said Mr. Quin. "I think you will recognize me when you do see me."

"Have you nothing more to tell me? Nothing more to explain?"

"To explain what?"

"To explain why I have met you here."

"You are a man of considerable knowledge," said Mr. Quin. "One word might mean something to you. I think it would and it might come in useful."

"What word?"

"Daltonism," said Mr. Quin. He smiled.

"I don't think—" Mr. Satterthwaite frowned for a moment. "Yes. Yes, I do know only just for the moment I can't remember."

"Goodbye for the present," said Mr. Quin. "Here is your car."

At that moment the car was pulling up by the post-office door. Mr. Satterthwaite went out to it. He was anxious not to waste more time and keep his hosts waiting longer than need be. But he was sad all the same at saying goodbye to his friend.

"There is nothing I can do for you?" he said, and his tone was almost wistful.

"Nothing you can do for *me*."

"For someone else?"

"I think so. Very likely."

"I hope I know what you mean."

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"I have the utmost faith in you," said Mr. Quin. "You always know things. You are very quick to observe and to know the meaning of things. You have not changed, I assure you."

His hand rested for a moment on Mr. Satterthwaite's shoulder, then he walked out and proceeded briskly down the village street in the opposite direction to Doverton Kingsbourne. Mr. Satterthwaite got into his car.

"I hope we won't have any more trouble," he said.

His chauffeur reassured him.

"It's no distance from here, sir. Three or four miles at most, and she's running beautifully now."

Mr. Satterthwaite said, "Daltonism." It still didn't mean anything to him, but yet he felt it should. It was a word he'd heard used before.

"Doverton Kingsbourne," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. He said it softly under his breath. The two words still meant to him what they had always meant. A place of joyous reunion, a place to which he couldn't get too quickly. A place where he was going to enjoy himself, even though so many of those whom he had known would not be there any longer. But Tom would be there. His old friend, Tom, and he thought again of the grass and the lake and the river and the things they had done together as boys.

Tea was set out on the lawn. Steps led out from the French windows in the drawing room and down to where a big copper beech at one side and a Cedar of Lebanon on the other made the setting for the afternoon scene. There were two painted and carved white tables and various garden chairs. Upright ones with colored cushions and lounging ones where you could lean back and stretch your feet out and sleep, if you wished to do so. Some of them had hoods over them to guard against the sun.

It was a beautiful early evening and the green of the grass was a soft deep color. The golden light came through the copper beech, and the cedar showed the lines of its beauty against a soft pinkish-golden sky.

Tom Addison was waiting for his guest in a long basket chair, his feet up. Mr. Satterthwaite noted with some amusement what he remembered from many other occasions of meeting his host: he had comfortable bedroom slippers suited to his slightly swollen gouty feet, and the shoes were odd ones. One red and one green. Good old Tom, thought

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Mr. Satterthwaite, he hasn't changed. Just the same. And he thought, "What an idiot I am. Of course I know what that word meant. Why didn't I think of it at once?"

"Thought you were never going to turn up, you old devil," said Tom Addison.

He was still a handsome old man. He had a broad face with deep-set twinkling gray eyes; his shoulders were still square and gave him a look of power. Every line in his face seemed a line of good humor and of affectionate welcome. "He never changes," thought Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Can't get up to greet you," said Tom Addison. "Takes two strong men and a stick to get me on my feet. Now, do you know our little crowd, or don't you? You know Simon, of course."

"Of course I do. It's a good few years since I've seen you, but you haven't changed much."

Squadron Leader Simon Gilliatt was a lean handsome man with a mop of red hair.

"Sorry you never came to see us when we were in Kenya," he said. "You'd have enjoyed yourself. Lots of things we could have shown you. Ah, well, one can't see what the future may bring. I thought I'd lay my bones in that country."

"We've got a very nice churchyard here," said Tom Addison. "Nobody's ruined our church yet by restoring it and we haven't very much new building round about, so there's plenty of room in the churchyard still."

"What a gloomy conversation you're having," said Beryl Gilliatt, smiling. "These are our boys," she said, "but you know them already, don't you, Mr. Satterthwaite?"

"I don't think I'd have known them now," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Indeed, the last time he had seen the two boys was on a day when he had taken them out from their prep school. Although there was no blood relationship between them—they had had different fathers and mothers—yet the boys could have been, and often were, taken for brothers. They were about the same height and both had red hair, Roland, presumably, having inherited it from his father and Timothy from his auburn-haired mother. There seemed also to be a kind of comradeship between them.

Yet really, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, they were very different. The difference was clearer now when they were, he supposed, between twenty-two and twenty-five years old. He could see no resemblance in Roland

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to his grandfather. Nor apart from his red hair did he look like his father.

Mr. Satterthwaite had wondered sometimes whether the boy would look like Lily, his dead mother. But there again he could see little resemblance. If anything, Timothy looked more as a son of Lily's might have looked. The fair skin and the high forehead and a delicacy of bone structure.

At his elbow a soft deep voice said, "I'm Inez. I don't expect you remember me. It was quite a long time ago when I saw you."

A beautiful girl, Mr. Satterthwaite thought at once. A dark type. He cast his mind back a long way to the days when he had come to be best man at Tom Addison's wedding to Pilar. She showed her Spanish blood, he thought—the carriage of her head and the dark aristocratic beauty.

Her father, Dr. Horton, was standing just behind her. He looked much older than when Mr. Satterthwaite had seen him last. A nice man and kindly. A good general practitioner, unambitious but reliable and devoted, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, to his daughter. He was obviously immensely proud of her.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt an enormous happiness creeping over him. All these people, although some of them strange to him, seemed like friends he had always known. The dark beautiful girl, the two red-haired boys, Beryl Gilliatt, fussing over the tea tray, arranging cups and saucers, beckoning to a maid from the house to bring out cakes and plates of sandwiches. A splendid tea. There were chairs that pulled up to the tables so that you could sit comfortably eating all you wanted to eat. The boys settled themselves, inviting Mr. Satterthwaite to sit between them.

He was pleased at that. He had already planned in his own mind that it was the boys he wanted to talk to first, to see how much they recalled to him Tom Addison in the old days, and he thought, "Lily. How I wish Lily could be here now."

Here he was, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, here he was back in his boyhood. Here where he had come and been welcomed by Tom's father and mother, an aunt or so, too, and a great-uncle and cousins. And now, well, there were not so many in this family, but it *was* a family. Tom in his bedroom slippers, one red, one green, old but still merry and happy. Happy in those who were around him.

And here was Doverton just, or almost just, as it had been. Not quite so well kept up,

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perhaps, but the lawn was in good condition. And down there he could see the gleam of the river through the trees, and the trees, too. More trees than there had been. And the house needing, perhaps, another coat of paint but not too badly.

After all, Tom Addison was a rich man. Well provided for, owning a large quantity of land. A man with simple tastes who spent enough to keep his place up but was not a spendthrift in other ways. He seldom traveled or went abroad nowadays, but he entertained. Not big parties, just friends. Friends who came to stay, friends who usually had some connection going back into the past. A friendly house.

He turned a little in his chair, drawing it away from the table so that he could see better the view down to the river. Down there was the mill, of course, and beyond the other side were fields. And in one of the fields, it amused him to see a kind of scarecrow, a dark figure on which birds were settling on the straw. Just for a moment he thought it looked like Mr. Harley Quin. Perhaps, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, it *is* my friend Mr. Quin. It was an absurd idea and yet if someone had piled up the scarecrow and tried to make it look like Mr. Quin, it could have had the sort of slender elegance that was foreign to most scarecrows.

"Are you looking at our scarecrow?" said Timothy. "We've got a name for him, you know. We call him Mr. Harley Barley."

"Do you indeed," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Dear me, I find that very interesting."

"Why do you find it interesting?" said Roland, with some curiosity.

"Well, because it rather resembles someone I know, whose name happens to be Harley. His first name, that is."

The boys began singing, "Harley Barley stands on guard, Harley Barley takes things hard. Guards the ricks and guards the hay, Keeps the trespassers away."

"Cucumber sandwich, Mr. Satterthwaite?" said Beryl Gilliatt, "or do you prefer a homemade pâté one?"

Mr. Satterthwaite accepted the homemade pâté. She deposited by his side a puce cup, the same color as he had admired in the shop. How gay it looked, all that tea set on the table. Yellow, red, blue, green, and all the rest of it.

He wondered if each one had their favorite color. Timothy, he noticed, had a red cup, Roland had a yellow one. Beside Timothy's cup was an object Mr. Satterthwaite could not at first identify. Then he

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saw it was a meerschaum pipe. It was years since Mr. Satterthwaite had thought of or seen a meerschaum pipe.

Roland, noticing what he was looking at, said, "Tim brought that back from Germany when he went. He's smoking his pipe all the time."

"Don't you smoke, Roland?"

"No. I'm not one for smoking. I don't smoke cigarettes and I don't smoke pot either."

Inez came to the table and sat down the other side of him. Both the young men pressed food on her. They started a laughing conversation together.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt very happy among these young people. Not that they took very much notice of him apart from their natural politeness. But he liked hearing them. He liked, too, making up his judgment about them. He thought, he was almost sure, that both the young men were in love with Inez. Well, it was not surprising. Propinquity brings these things about.

Both had come to live here with their grandfather. A beautiful girl, Roland's first cousin, was living almost next door. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. He could just see the house through the trees where it poked up from the road just beyond the front gate. That was the same house that Dr. Horton had lived in last time he came here, seven or eight years ago.

He looked at Inez. He wondered which of the two young men she preferred or whether her affections were already engaged elsewhere. There was no special reason why she should fall in love with one of these two attractive young specimens of the male race.

Having eaten as much as he wanted, Mr. Satterthwaite drew his chair back, altering its angle a little so that he could look all round him.

Mrs. Gilliatt was still busy. Very much the housewife, he thought, making perhaps rather more of a fuss than she need of domesticity. Continually offering people cakes, taking their cups away and replenishing them, handing things round. Somehow, he thought, it would be more pleasant and more informal if she let people help themselves. He wished she was not so busy a hostess.

He looked up to the place where Tom Addison lay stretched out in his chair. Tom Addison was also watching Beryl Gilliatt. Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: "He doesn't like her. No. Tom doesn't like her. Well, perhaps that's to be expected." After all, Beryl had

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taken the place of his own daughter, of Simon Gilliatt's first wife, Lily. "My beautiful Lily," thought Mr. Satterthwaite again, and wondered why for some reason he felt that although he could not see anyone like her, yet Lily in some strange way was here. She was here at this tea party.

"I suppose one begins to imagine these things as one gets old," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "After all, why shouldn't Lily be here to see her son."

He looked affectionately at Timothy and then suddenly realized that he was not looking at Lily's son. Roland was Lily's son. Timothy was Beryl's son.

"I believe Lily knows I'm here. I believe she'd like to speak to me," thought Mr. Satterthwaite. "Oh, dear, oh, dear, I mustn't start imagining foolish things."

For some reason he looked again at the scarecrow. It didn't look like a scarecrow now. It looked like Mr. Harley Quin. Some tricks of the light, of the sunset, were providing it with color, and there was a black dog like Hermes chasing the birds.

"Color," thought Mr. Satterthwaite, and looked again at the table and the tea set and the people having tea. "Why am I here?" said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "Why am I here and what ought I to be doing. There's a reason."

Now he knew there was some crisis affecting all these people—or only some of them. Beryl Gilliatt? She was nervous about something. On edge. Tom? Nothing wrong with Tom. He wasn't affected. A lucky man to own this beauty, to own Doverton and to have a grandson so that when he died all this would come to Roland. Yes, all this would be Roland's. Was Tom hoping that Roland would marry Inez? Or would he have a fear of first cousins marrying? "Nothing must happen," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "nothing must happen. I must prevent it."

Really, his thoughts were the thoughts of a madman. A peaceful scene. A tea set. The varying colors of the harlequin cups. He looked at the white meerschaum pipe lying against the red of the cup. Beryl Gilliatt said something to Timothy. Timothy nodded, got up, and went off toward the house. Beryl removed some empty plates from the table, adjusted a chair or two, murmured something to Roland, who went across and offered a frosted cake to Dr. Horton.

Mr. Satterthwaite watched her. He saw the sweep of her sleeve as she passed the table. He

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saw a red cup get pushed off the table. It broke on the iron feet of a chair. He heard her little exclamation as she picked up the bits. She went to the tea tray, came back, and placed on the table a pale blue cup and saucer. She replaced the meerschaum pipe, putting it close against it. She brought the teapot and poured tea, then she moved away.

The table was untenanted now. Inez also had got up and left it. Gone to speak to her grandfather. "I don't understand," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "Something's going to happen. What's going to happen?"

A table with different colored cups and—yes, Timothy, his red hair glowing in the sun. Red hair glowing with that same tint, that attractive sideways wave that Simon Gilliatt's hair had always had. Timothy, coming back, standing a moment, looking at the table with a slightly puzzled eye, then going to where the meerschaum pipe rested against the pale blue cup.

Inez came back then. She laughed suddenly and said, "Timothy, you're drinking your tea out of the wrong cup. The blue cup's mine. Yours is the red one."

And Timothy said, "Don't be silly, Inez, I know my own cup. It's got sugar in it and you won't like it. Nonsense. This is my cup. The meerchaum's up against it."

It came to Mr. Satterthwaite then. A shock. Was he mad? Was he imagining things? Was any of this real?

He got up. He walked quickly toward the table, and as Timothy raised the blue cup to his lips he shouted.

"Don't drink that!" he called. "Don't drink it, I say."

Timothy turned a surprised face. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. Dr. Horton, rather startled, got up from his seat and was coming near.

"What's the matter, Satterthwaite?"

"That cup. There's something wrong about it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Don't let the boy drink from it."

Horton stared at it. "My dear fellow—"

"I know what I'm saying. The red cup was his," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "and the red cup's broken. It's been replaced with a blue one. He doesn't know the red from blue, does he?"

Dr. Horton looked puzzled. "D'you mean—d'you mean—like Tom?"

"Tom Addison. He's colorblind. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. We all

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know that. That's why he's got odd shoes on today. He never knows red from green."

"This boy is the same."

"But—but surely not. Anyway, there's never been any sign of it in—in Roland."

"There might be, though, mightn't there?" said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I'm right in thinking—Daltonism. That's what they call it, don't they?"

"It was a name they used to call it by, yes."

"It's not inherited by a female, but it passes through the female. Lily wasn't color-blind, but Lily's son might easily be color-blind."

"But, my dear Satterthwaite, Timothy isn't Lily's son. Roland is Lily's son. I know they're rather alike. Same age, same colored hair, but—well, perhaps you don't remember."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I shouldn't have remembered. But I know now. I can see the resemblance, too. Roland's Beryl's son. They were both babies, weren't they, when Simon remarried. It is very easy for a woman looking after two babies, especially if both of them were going to have red hair. Timothy's Lily's son and Roland is Beryl's son. Beryl's and Christopher Eden's. There is no reason why he should be color-blind. I know it, I tell you. I know it!"

He saw Dr. Horton's eyes go from one to the other. Timothy, not catching what they said but holding the blue cup and looking puzzled.

"I saw her buy it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Listen to me, man. You've known me for some years. You know that I don't make mistakes if I say a thing positively."

"Quite true. I've never known you make a mistake."

"Take that cup away from him," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Take it to an analytic chemist and find out what's in it. I saw that woman buy that cup. She bought it in the village shop. She knew then that she was going to break a red cup, replace it by a blue, and that Timothy would never know that the colors were different."

"I think you're mad, Satterthwaite. But all the same I'm going to do what you say."

He advanced on the table, stretched out a hand to the blue cup.

"Do you mind letting me have a look at that?" said Dr. Horton.

"Of course," said Timothy. He looked slightly surprised.

"I think there's a flaw in the china, here, you know. Rather interesting."

Beryl came across the lawn. She came quickly and sharply.

"What are you doing? What's

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the matter? What is happening?"

"Nothing's the matter," said Dr. Horton cheerfully. "I just want to show the boys a little experiment I'm going to make with a cup of tea."

He was looking at her very closely and he saw the expression of fear, of terror. Mr. Satterthwaite saw the change of countenance.

"Would you like to come with me, Satterthwaite? Just a little experiment, you know. A matter of testing porcelain and different qualities in it nowadays. A very interesting discovery was made lately."

Chatting, he walked along the grass. Mr. Satterthwaite followed him and the two young men, chatting to each other, followed.

"What's the Doc up to now, Roly?" said Timothy.

"I don't know," said Roland. "He seems to have got some very extraordinary ideas. Oh, well, we shall hear about it later, I expect. Let's go and get our bikes."

Beryl Gilliatt turned abruptly. She retraced her steps rapidly up the lawn toward the house. Tom Addison called to her, "Anything the matter, Beryl?"

"Something I'd forgotten," said Beryl Gilliatt. "That's all."

Tom Addison looked inquiringly toward Simon Gilliatt.

"Anything wrong with your wife?" he said.

"Beryl? Oh, no, not that I know of. I expect it's some little thing or other that she's forgotten. Nothing I can do for you, Beryl?" he called.

"No. No, I'll be back later." She turned her head half sideways, looking at the old man lying back in the chair. She spoke suddenly and vehemently. "You silly old fool. You've got the wrong shoes on again today. They don't match. Do you know you've got one shoe that's red and one shoe that's green?"

"Ah, done it again, have I?" said Tom Addison. "They look exactly the same color to me, you know. It's odd, isn't it, but there it is."

She went past him, her steps quickening.

Presently Mr. Satterthwaite and Dr. Horton reached the gate that led out into the roadway. They heard a motorcycle speeding along.

"She's gone," said Dr. Horton. "She's run for it. We ought to have stopped her, I suppose. Do you think she'll come back?"

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I don't think she'll come back. Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "it's best that way."

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"You mean?"

"It's an old house," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "An old family. A good family. A lot of good people in it. One doesn't want trouble, scandal, brought on it. Best to let her go, I think."

"Tom Addison never liked her," said Dr. Horton. "Never. He was always polite and kind but he didn't like her."

"And there's the boy to think of," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"The boy. You mean?"

"The other boy. Roland. This way he needn't know about what his mother was trying to do."

"Why on earth did she do it?"

"You've no doubt now that she did," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"No. I've no doubt now. I saw her face, Satterthwaite, when she looked at me. I knew then that what you'd said was truth. But why?"

"Greed, I suppose," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "She hadn't any money of her own, I believe. Her first husband, Christopher Eden, was a nice chap by all accounts but he hadn't anything in the way of means. But Tom Addison's grandchild has big money coming to him. A lot of money. Property all around here has appreciated enormously. I've no doubt Tom Addison will leave the bulk of what he has to his grandson. She wanted it for her own son and through her own son, of course, for herself. She is a greedy woman."

Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head back suddenly.

"Something's on fire over there," he said.

"Good lord, so it is. Oh, it's the scarecrow down in the field. Some young chap or other's set fire to it, I suppose. But there's nothing to worry about. There are no ricks or anything anywhere near. It'll just burn itself out."

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Well, you go on, Doctor. You don't need me to help you in your tests."

"I've no doubt of what I shall find. I don't mean the exact substance, but I have come to your belief that this blue cup holds death."

Mr. Satterthwaite had turned back through the gate. He was going now down in the direction where the scarecrow was burning. Behind it was the sunset. A remarkable sunset that evening. Its colors illuminated the air round it, illuminated the burning scarecrow.

"So that's the way you've chosen to go," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He looked slightly startled then, for in the neighborhood

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of the flames he saw the tall slight figure of a woman. A woman dressed in some pale mother-of-pearl coloring. She was walking in the direction of Mr. Satterthwaite. He stopped, watching.

"Lily," he said. "Lily."

He saw her quite plainly now. It was Lily walking toward him. Too far away for him to see her face but he knew very well who it was. Just for a moment or two he wondered whether anyone else would see her or whether the sight was only for him. He said, not very loud, only in a whisper, "It's all right, Lily, your son is safe."

She stopped then. She raised one hand to her lips. He didn't see her smile, but he knew she was smiling. She kissed her hand and waved it to him and then she turned. She walked back toward where the scarecrow was disintegrating into a mass of ashes.

"She's going away again," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "She's going away with him. They're walking away together. They belong to the same world, of course. They only come—those sort of people—they only come when it's a case of love or death or both."

He wouldn't see Lily again, he supposed, but he wondered how soon he would meet Mr. Quin again. He went back across the lawn toward the tea table and the harlequin tea set, and beyond that, to his old friend Tom Addison. Beryl wouldn't come back. He was sure of it. Doverton Kingsbourne was safe again.

Across the lawn came the small black dog in flying leaps. It came to Mr. Satterthwaite, panting a little and wagging its tail. Through its collar was twisted a scrap of paper. Mr. Satterthwaite stooped and detached it.

On it in colored letters was written a message:

CONGRATULATIONS!
TO OUR NEXT MEETING
H.Q.

"Thank you, Hermes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, and watched the black dog flying across the meadow to rejoin the two figures that he knew were there but could no longer see.

"Q"

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"Rumors had begun almost at once about the things that happened at the old mansion—unspeakable things . . ."

THE SINS OF THE FATHER

by ELLIOT L. GILBERT

A woman would have to be crazy to marry Kirk Martineau.

That, at any rate, was the opinion of the villagers. Normally such an opinion would be suspect. Any woman coming as a stranger into a remote town to marry its wealthiest citizen would naturally provoke some hostility.

In the small seaside town of East Hallam, however, the hostility was mixed with sympathy for the slight blonde girl who had arrived only a few months before from a distant state to be the new mistress of Martineau House.

Money was all very well as a motive for marriage. There was no need to lecture the inhabitants of East Hallam on the advantages of a fine old house and a rich husband. But when the house was the old Martineau place, perched gloomily on a headland jutting out to sea, and when the rich husband was Kirk Martineau . . .

There were those charitable souls in town who claimed that a son should not be abominated for the sins of his father. But the sins they had in mind were ordinary ones, things like drunkenness or larceny or even a good, clean, angry murder.

When the father was Duncan Martineau, however, even Christian charity was strained to the breaking point.

There were still plenty of people around town who remembered the night old Duncan had killed his wife. When that first mistress of Martineau House, also a slight blonde girl, had arrived, many years before, to live with her new husband on his secluded estate by the sea, rumors had begun almost at once about the things that happened at the old mansion—unspeakable things to which only a perverse imagination could give the name of love.

True, the woman had never complained, but this only made the matter worse. On her

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infrequent trips to town no one could miss the signs of abuse she bore proudly on her arms and shoulders and throat, like grim badges of achievement.

This went on for more than a year, during which time the boy Kirk was born and the pale wife of Duncan Martineau visibly declined. So badly, indeed, did things appear to be going with her toward the end that the women of the town had taken to visiting her, in the face of old Duncan's clear disapproval, to give the poor girl every opportunity to ask for help if she wanted it and to let the angry husband know that his behavior was being watched.

All these precautions failed. One day Duncan Martineau came into town and announced that his wife had run away.

Though the girl had had every reason to leave her tormentor, no one believed the story. Tales had long circulated about violent midnight rites conducted behind the old mansion on a sunken terrace paved with flat square white stones. If on one of these occasions the bloody ritual had got out of hand, it would have been a simple enough matter for the husband to take the body of his wife out to sea and sink it where it could never be found.

The townspeople had demanded an investigation, and everything inside and outside the old house, especially the infamous white paved terrace, had been searched with unusual thoroughness and a mounting air of expectancy. It was reasoned that so violent a crime must have left a trace—a last message, perhaps, or a blood-stain—which old Duncan had failed to remove.

But no trace of murder was found. The old house contained no messages, and the flat white stones, which would have been indelibly marked by the least spot of blood spilled on them, were clean. Duncan Martineau had gone on living in the gloomy mansion as the years passed and his son grew up under his cruel eye.

At no point was there ever any rebellion by the boy against the fate which both the tutelage of his father and the expectations of the village had prepared for him. When at last Duncan died and young Kirk became master of Martineau House, the townspeople of East Hallam knew what to expect.

The arrival of the slight blonde wife caused no surprise. Neither, in the weeks that followed, did the growing evidence of mistreatment of the girl or the recurrence of rumors about unholy midnight rites.

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In the end Kirk Martineau did what his heritage and training had taught him to do. The white stones of the sunken terrace, over which he bore the slim mutilated body of his young wife toward its deep sea grave, gleamed coldly in the moonlight.

The same stones awaited his solitary return. On one of them there was a memento of the evening's work. All that night and all the following day the young husband labored to clean away the bright splash of blood from the stone.

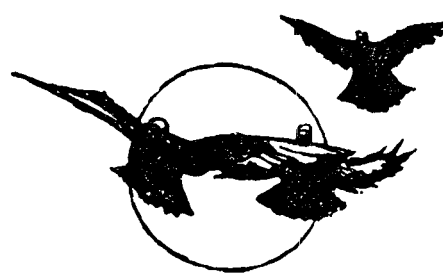
But nothing would remove the stain.

Panic beat at his mind. In the village, he knew, the women who had spied on him ever since his return to East Hallam with his bride would soon be setting out on their daily visit. When they did not find the girl, they would search the house, discover the flat bloody stone, and surmise the truth.

What should he do? To cleanse the bloodstain was impossible. To remove the stone itself would raise unanswerable questions. In the end he was inspired by his deadly danger both with an idea and with the strength to carry it out.

Even as the voices of the villagers approached the house, Kirk Martineau, for a moment sublimely strong, pried the flat white paving stone from where it was imbedded in the earth and turned it over so that it fit exactly, undetectably, into its depression.

When the women reached him minutes later, he was staring at the old, nearly faded bloodstain on the square stone at his feet.



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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Once again we observe Mr. Leonard Strang, the little old science teacher at Aldershot High School, playing detective—and playing the role to the scientific hilt. But this time there is something different. In his previous experiments in detection Mr. Strang was usually confronted by the question: Who did it? And often it was equally important to answer the question: Why was it done? In this newest adventure the dominant question is: How was it done? How were the stolen articles removed from the high-school building despite the presence of theft patrols and the searches of all students by the faculty?

MR. STRANG INVENTS A STRANGE DEVICE

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

It was hot for the middle of May, thought Mr. Strang as he stood in the sunlight just outside the main entrance to Aldershot High School. Through open windows he could hear the buzzing of voices coming from classrooms at the front of the building. Be inconspicuous—that was what his principal, Mr. Guthrey, had said. The old science teacher wondered just how inconspicuous he could look with sweat pouring from his balding brow and fogging his thick glasses.

"Heads up!" someone shouted.

Mr. Strang stepped to one side just as Warren Seabert, Aldershot's new young baseball coach, lurched through the door, carrying over one shoulder a lumpy duffel bag with the handles of several baseball bats protruding from its open end.

"Excuse me, Mr. Strang," Seabert panted. "We've got a game over in Farley Ridge this afternoon, and I want to put these in my car."

"What's the matter, did the

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team bus break down?" asked Mr. Strang.

"Nope. But I like to have a car at away games in case of emergency. And mine's the only one available." And with a wave of his free hand the coach was off toward the blue station wagon parked at the curb.

Moments later he returned, his T-shirt stained with perspiration, and flopped down on the wide stone steps. With an audible cracking of his aging joints Mr. Strang sat beside him. The little science teacher liked Warren. Not much taller than Mr. Strang himself, the new coach had a nose that had been broken at least once, a mop of bright red hair that topped his head like a battle flag on a castle turret, and a breezy informal manner that the older teacher found refreshing.

"The sun's really beating down, man," said Warren, wiping his forehead. "Let's go inside where it's cooler."

"I can't," Mr. Strang replied. "I'm on duty."

"Duty? What duty? It's the junior-senior lunch period. All the action's out in back, on the athletic field."

"You mean you haven't heard about Mr. Guthrey's theft patrol?"

"Theft patrol?" Warren's eyebrows shot up. "What theft patrol? You're putting me on."

"No. Silly as it may sound, I'm not. Several articles have been stolen from the building and—" Mr. Strang paused as the front door opened and Mary Dakin, a senior who was in his third-period chemistry class, walked outside. Clutched in one arm was a large shopping bag.

"Hello, Mary," said the teacher. "Going home for lunch?"

"Oh, hi, Mr. Strang. Yeah, I thought I would." She indicated the bag with a nod of her head. "This has to go home today, and I've got an appointment after school." As she started down the steps Mr. Strang rose quickly.

"Mary?"

Slowly the girl turned. Her shoulders slumped and a look of disgust passed across her face. "Mr. Strang, you're not in on this too."

"Yes, Mary. I'm afraid I am. May I have a look in the bag, please?"

"Oh, gee, it's just some stuff I did in sewing class." She looked at the young baseball coach, her cheeks reddening.

"I'm sure it is. But I'm supposed to check everything. You understand, don't you?"

"But you know I wouldn't—" All at once she flung the bag savagely at the teacher. "All right, here!" she shouted, almost in tears. "Check the dumb thing. I've never been so em-

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barrassed in my whole life."

Reluctantly Mr. Strang began pulling objects from the bag. An apron. A peasant blouse. And then behind him he heard Warren chuckle as Mr. Strang extracted two pairs of shocking-pink hotpants.

At the sound of the laughter the girl burst into tears. Grabbing her clothing, she stuffed it back into the bag and ran down the steps. Mr. Strang stood beside Warren and wished the earth would open up and swallow him.

Marvin W. Guthrey's theft patrol had struck again.

"I don't care what the reason is, Mr. Strang. It's embarrassing for the kids, and it's just not fair!" At the end of the day Kenneth Byington, Aldershot High School's student-council president, had made it a point to see Mr. Strang in his room. "Oh, we're not blaming you, Mr. Strang," he went on. "But is it right that every student who leaves school with a package has to be searched? I mean, what kind of a place are you running here, anyway?"

"I tried to make that point to Mr. Guthrey when he first brought up this theft-patrol business, Kenny," replied the teacher. "He couldn't see any other way around the problem."

"But it's not even legal." Kenneth paused and looked Mr. Strang straight in the eye. "Is it?"

"According to Mr. Guthrey we're within our rights as long as we don't make any accusations and don't search anyone who insists on being left alone."

"Sure, sure," answered Kenneth sarcastically. "And anybody who doesn't want to give the teacher a look at what he's carrying is automatically guilty, is that it?"

"Kenny, perhaps you don't realize the problem we—"

"Come on, Mr. Strang. Things are getting stolen from the school here. And whoever's ripping the stuff off has got to get it out. That's the way you figure, isn't it? So instead of really going after the guilty person you make like all of us are crooks or something. Why, Mary Dakin was crying all afternoon. And just because somebody took a couple of colored pencils or something."

"It was more than a couple of colored pencils," came a voice from the classroom doorway.

Both Kenneth and Mr. Strang swiveled their heads toward the sound. "Oh," said Kenneth softly. "Hello, Mr. Guthrey."

"Good day, Kenneth," said the principal with a nod. "I

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heard you planned on seeing Mr. Strang this afternoon. And since the idea of the theft patrol was mine I thought it best for me to answer any questions personally. I'd like to begin by saying that from the start Mr. Strang was against the idea of searching students. He did it only because of my orders."

"But why?" asked Kenneth hesitantly. "What's the big deal over a few things that have disappeared?"

"Early last month," Guthrey began briskly, "someone broke into four cartons of books left outside the door of our library. He took seventeen volumes. Most of them were best-sellers, but there was one book of colored prints of old maps that was worth over twenty-five dollars. A few days after that the same person—at least we assume it was the same one—cleaned out a locked supply closet in the physical education office. Two weeks later, down in the back hall, twelve boxes containing a total of one gross of typewriter ribbons disappeared. And just today—I only got word an hour ago—in the cafeteria two boxes of canned fruit were opened and every last can was taken. Our losses on all those items are close to four hundred dollars."

Guthrey walked across the room and crammed himself into one of the chair-desks. "So you see, Kenneth," he concluded, "this isn't just penny-ante theft any more. And with another month of school to go there's no telling what'll disappear next." He gave a rueful laugh. "I swear, I expect to hear at any moment that the whole chemistry laboratory is missing."

"And the only way you can figure out to catch your thief is to search everybody with a package, is that it?" asked Kenneth.

"Well, Ken, it's the taxpayers who'll get stuck with the bill," replied Guthrey. "I might add that the P.T.A. is firmly behind my theft-patrol idea. But if you can come up with anything better, I'd be glad to hear about it."

Kenneth shook his head slowly. "I'm no detective," he said. "It just doesn't seem right that everybody's got to get it in the neck just because of one person."

"Well then," said Guthrey in his most reasonable tone," what would you do in my place?"

"I dunno. You got to stop it, I guess. But look, Mr. Guthrey, why just the kids? I'm sorry if I'm out of line, but like I said to Mr. Strang, it's just not fair."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say, Kenneth."

"Well, I do," interrupted Mr.

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Strang. "Two thousand students come into this building every school day. And we tell them they've got to be searched if they bring anything home, as if this were some kind of penal institution, rather than a school. On the other hand, what about the others who come in and go out of the building? The custodians, the salesmen, the deliverymen? We don't insist that they be searched before leaving."

"But the students are—"

"Sure. Oh, sure," said Mr. Strang with magnificent irony. "They're just kids. Who cares about their rights or feelings?"

"Mr. Strang!" said Guthrey indignantly. "Are you suggesting that visitors to our building—including parents—all be searched?"

"Fair's fair," replied the teacher blithely. "Remember, your theft patrol's been around for three weeks and hasn't found a thing. Oh, yes, just one more point."

"What's that, Mr. Strang?" said Guthrey.

"Don't forget the teachers—and the administration." He pointed a finger directly at the principal. "Including you, Mr. Guthrey."

"But you don't—I mean, I can't—" Guthrey got up angrily. "And just who'd do the searching?" he asked.

"Yes, that's a problem, isn't it? The whole thing—including this theft patrol—is kind of ridiculous. So I'd like to make you a proposition, Mr. Guthrey."

"What proposition?"

"You call off your theft patrol—as of tomorrow morning—and I'll guarantee to find your thief within two weeks."

"You? But we've even had the police in. What can you—"

Mr. Strang jerked a thumb at his own narrow chest. "I'm not the police," he said.

"I don't know, Leonard. I admit there were a few things around here you managed to clear up, but in this case—well, I just don't know. How would you go about it?"

"Professional secret," said Mr. Strang with a straight face.

"Two weeks, eh?" Guthrey considered the teacher, who was wiping his glasses on an acid-stained necktie. "I suppose it would get me off the hook with the students. All right, Leonard. But remember, if you haven't produced the thief within two weeks, I will hold you personally responsible for anything else that's stolen." Guthrey stalked out of the room, leaving the teacher to ponder that parting shot.

"Hey, Mr. Strang," said Kenneth admiringly. "That was great! You're really something else. I didn't know you had a

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plan. Tell me, how are you going to find out who did it?"

"Kenny," replied the teacher, shaking his head sadly, "I haven't the faintest idea."

At odd moments during the rest of the week Mr. Strang mulled over the problem he had set for himself. Keeping watch for whoever was doing the stealing was out of the question—there were just too many halls and storerooms, doorways and closets. For a while he considered dusting all packages with either methylene blue or gentian violet. Either of these chemicals would stain the hands of the thief with brilliant color, and any attempt to wash the hands would merely spread the stain. Unfortunately neither chemical was selective. It would also stain the hands of those legitimately entitled to handle supplies.

By Friday afternoon the teacher only had two facts to go on. First, the thefts had occurred at irregular intervals, beginning the first week in April. And second, all the stolen supplies were articles that could easily be converted into cash once they'd been removed from the building. There was no way they could be traced back to the school.

Once the supplies had been taken from the building—that was the key to the whole thing. Books, typewriter ribbons, canned fruit—how could anyone possibly spirit such things away without being spotted?

"I just wish I could design a package that would hoist a red flag and yell 'Stop, thief' when it was being stolen," mused the teacher.

That afternoon as he went to the office to hang up his keys before going home, Mr. Strang glanced idly at the teachers' bulletin board on the wall beside the keyrack. Summer job openings, announcements of college courses, spring sport schedules, new fire drill instructions, an announcement that the wife of one of the foreign-language teachers had recently given birth to a boy—the bits of paper, neatly typed or printed, were an ever-changing journal of the affairs of Aldershot High School.

Then something caught Mr. Strang's eye. Whipping his glasses from his jacket pocket he perched them on his nose and peered closely at one of the announcements. He read it twice and then scribbled something quickly in a small notebook.

"Asteroidea!" he mumbled. In the parking lot he angrily kicked the front tire of his battered purple car before getting in.

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Even though the knowledge was proving painful, he now knew who had been doing the stealing and how the supplies had been taken from the building. Proving it would be something else again.

That evening in his small room at Mrs. Mackey's boardinghouse Mr. Strang made several rough sketches of a device that looked on paper as if it might have come from a science-fiction story. He didn't know if it would work, or even if it was possible to construct it. But he intended to find out.

The following morning Mr. Strang drove to the Aldershot Surplus Warehouse at the edge of the business district and spent most of an hour wandering among shelves filled with battle jackets, helmets, tools, obsolete swords and knives, and all the other items that the military, in its wisdom, decided it no longer needed. Finally he found what he was looking for. The cost was more than he'd expected to pay, but if his scheme worked it was possible he'd be reimbursed by the school district.

His second stop was at a low brick building with a sign on top that read: *Tommy's Machine and Tool Shop.* Thomas Mulvahey, the owner and entire labor force of the establishment, looked up from a milling machine as Mr. Strang entered.

"Hi, Mr. Strang," he called, wiping his oily hands on a rag. "What brings you to these parts?"

"I want something made, Tommy," said the teacher. He showed the machinist the sketch he had drawn and explained the purpose of the device. "Can you do it?"

"Umm. Shouldn't be too hard. I've got an old timing mechanism out in the back room somewhere that I could use. When would you need it?"

"As soon as possible. Monday morning, if it won't be too much trouble. And Tommy?"

"Yeah, Mr. Strang?"

"About payment," said the teacher. "I can't afford—"

"Forget it," replied the machinist. "This job's on the house."

"Look, I didn't mean—"

"Mr. Strang, two years ago my kid Joey was having trouble with physics. You tutored him at my place for a solid three months and wouldn't take anything more'n a cup of coffee and some cookies. I couldn't afford a private tutor, but you came anyway. I've been wondering how I could do something to pay you back, and here's my chance."

"In that case I accept," said the teacher. "I hope it won't be

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too difficult to make what I have in mind."

"A piece of cake," smiled Tommy. "I'll drop it off at your place tomorrow afternoon."

On Monday morning Mr. Strang arrived at school more than an hour early. From the back seat of his car he took a cardboard box about nine inches square and eighteen inches high. He left the box in the custodians' office with explicit instructions to drop it off outside his classroom door that Wednesday at approximately 10:15.

On Wednesday, at 10:12, the box was delivered. The classroom was empty, since Mr. Strang had charge of a study hall at the far end of the building.

The same day at two o'clock Mr. Strang asked his principal for permission to call a meeting of the entire faculty as soon as the pupils were dismissed. The announcement of the faculty meeting was read over the school's public address system.

At 2:20 Art Mickel, president of the Aldershot Teachers Association, was at Mr. Strang's door, his jaw thrust forward belligerently.

"Leonard," he barked as Mr. Strang answered his knock, "as soon as I heard the announcement I went to see Mr. Guthrey. I told him he's got no business holding a meeting on such short notice. He said you were the one who wanted it."

"That's right, I did," Mr. Strang answered.

"But you can't. I mean, Tuesday's supposed to be meeting day. And besides, Guthrey says nobody—but nobody—is supposed to miss this meeting of yours."

"Also correct," replied the teacher.

"C'mon, be reasonable. The tennis and baseball teams have games today, and the debating team's supposed to have a meeting right after school. Besides, some teachers have got college courses they have to get to. It's bad planning on your part, Leonard. Admit it."

"Art, you've known me a good many years. This is important or I wouldn't have asked Mr. Guthrey to call the meeting. Just take my word for it that everybody on the faculty must be there."

Mickel looked at Mr. Strang questioningly. "I could file a grievance, you know."

"File away, Art, but I'd advise you not to."

Mickel was silent for a long moment. "Ah, you know I wouldn't do a thing like that," he said. "But, Leonard, this had better be good—your meeting, I mean. Otherwise there'll be hell

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to pay among the teachers."

"Let 'em holler, Art. Just get everybody to that meeting."

By 3:30 the auditorium of Aldershot High School contained more than a hundred grumbling teachers. The microphone squawked twice as the amplifier was adjusted, and then Marvin W. Guthrey stood up to speak.

"I know that having a meeting at this time is inconvenient," he began. There were murmurs of agreement. "Frankly," the principal went on, "I'm just as mystified about it as you are. As you know, there have been thefts of materials and supplies from the building, and Mr. Strang has taken it upon himself to investigate them. I understand he's called this meeting to issue something in the nature of a progress report on his investigations."

"How long are we going to be here?" shouted someone.

"I think I'll let Mr. Strang answer that one," said Guthrey. The teacher rose and walked toward the microphone.

"I understand your annoyance at this meeting," Mr. Strang began slowly. "So first let me say that it shouldn't last more than half an hour—perhaps less."

There was a patter of polite applause.

"You're all aware," the teacher went on, "of the thefts that have been taking place in the building. For a time we were searching the students, trying to find some trace of the stolen goods. But then the president of the student council made a point that I hadn't considered."

"What point?" called out Steve Weissman of the math department.

"He said that as long as we were searching the students, why not search everybody."

"The kid's a wise guy," shouted a voice.

"No, he's not." Mr. Strang shook his head. "You see, we all assumed a student must have done the stealing. But there was no evidence of it except our own preconceived notion. It was only when I started considering the fact that anyone—student or staff member—might be the guilty one that anything began to make sense."

"Are you trying to tell us," said Art Mickel, with fire in his eye, "that a teacher could be guilty?"

"Why not, Art? Four hundred dollars is a lot of money."

"*Did* a teacher do it, Leonard?" Mickel persisted. "And can you *prove* it?"

"I think so to the first question," Mr. Strang replied, "and I hope so to the second."

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"Okay, I'll bite. How did this unknown teacher get the stuff out of the building?"

"That puzzled me for a long time, Art," said Mr. Strang. "But then I got to thinking about something. The typewriter ribbons, for example, were stolen outright—that is, just as they came from the factory. On the other hand, the library books were taken out of their cartons, as were the cans of fruit. Why?"

A hundred and twenty-three teachers leaned forward in their seats.

"There seemed to be only one explanation," Mr. Strang went on. "The typewriter ribbons were in small boxes. But the cartons of books and the cartons of canned goods were quite large. Obviously our thief had some receptacle to carry out his stolen goods, and that receptacle must have been able to contain everything that was stolen. Bulky items, however, would have to be broken down into smaller units. This suggested that while the container was quite large, the opening in it was rather small."

A murmur of assent passed through the group.

"That still doesn't prove it was a teacher though, does it, Leonard?" asked Mickel.

"No, of course not," Mr. Strang agreed quickly. "But then I got to the supplies taken from the locked closet. That theft would indicate the use of a key. And keys belong in the hands of teachers, not students."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Heads turned as James Whitiker, the head of the Aldershot physical education department, rose from his seat. A mountain of a man, Whitiker had a thick shock of iron-white hair below which his scowling face seemed carved of granite.

"Yes, Jim," said Mr. Strang.

"I don't like the way this meeting is going one little bit," said Whitiker. "In the first place it's not impossible, you know, for a kid to have gotten hold of a key to that closet. And if not, you're accusing a member of my department of doing the stealing. Because we're the only one with keys to that closet."

Mr. Strang stared at the floor. "I don't know that it's my place to accuse anybody, Jim," he said slowly. "I just want to present the facts. Then you can make up your own mind."

"Don't play word games with me, Leonard," snapped Whitiker. "Who do you think did it?"

"Jim," said Mr. Strang in a voice so soft his listeners had to strain to hear, "were you aware that every one of the thefts took place on days when the

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baseball team was playing an away game? I saw the schedule on the office bulletin board. The similarity between game dates and the times the stealing was done couldn't be missed."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. And how did our mysterious thief get the stuff out of the building? Did he hide it in a baseball or something?"

"No. It's my belief he hid it in that big duffel bag—the one Warren Seabert packs for every game. After all, nobody thinks twice about seeing him in the building with that bag on the days when there's a game. And the little opening at the end would explain why the cartons of books and cans had to be opened."

"But wouldn't Warren notice the extra weight? Explain that, Mr. Detective."

"He might. But he wouldn't care if he were the thief," said Mr. Strang, wiping perspiration from his brow. "And once the stolen stuff was in his car he could drop it off anywhere before going to the game."

"Hey, man, let's hold everything right here." Warren Seabert had popped out of his chair. "Let me get this straight. Are you telling everybody that *I* took that stuff, Mr. Strang? Because if you are, I'm coming up there and knock your—"

"Just a moment, please," said the teacher. "Warren, in science we start with the hypothesis—the theory. But no theory—including the one that you are the thief—can be accepted without proof. So I decided on a little experiment."

"Yeah? What kind of an experiment?"

"I made the thief an offer he couldn't refuse."

This catch phrase from *The Godfather* brought a few laughs. Others, however, were not amused. It is seldom that one teacher baldly accuses another of being a criminal.

"Today," Mr. Strang went on, "there is a baseball game—away. So this morning I had a box left outside my door. On the box were stenciled the words FIRE EXTINGUISHERS. The box was of a size which might have held four of the little red extinguishers we have in all the science labs—the kind that could easily be sold for home use. Not only was the box neatly taped shut as if it had just come from the factory, but it was small enough to fit into that duffel bag of yours without being opened. I made sure of that."

"So?"

"So sometime during the morning while I was not in my classroom the box was stolen."

"Oh, sure." Warren jabbed his finger at Mr. Strang. "I get

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it. Now all you do is just search my station wagon and look inside the duffel bag, eh? Well, no dice, Mr. Strang. My car is locked and it's going to stay that way."

"A search won't be necessary, Warren."

"Huh?"

"Last week I considered the possibility of a package that could signal for help when it was stolen. And I think I found one. You see, the box outside my room did not contain fire extinguishers."

"Yeah? What then?"

"On Saturday," said Mr. Strang, "I arranged to have made for me a rather strange device. It's basically a valve. The valve is operated by a spring-wound timing mechanism. Without going into all the details just let me say that the valve can be set to open at any prearranged time. It's quite ingenious, really."

"I still don't see how that proves I—"

"The valve, Warren, was inside that fire-extinguisher box. It's connected on one side to a small tank of compressed air. The other side of the valve is attached to a war-surplus inflatable life raft. When deflated, the raft could be packed in the box. Inflated, it measures about four by six feet." By this time Mr. Strang had the teachers' undivided attention.

"And the valve was set to open," he went on, glancing at his watch, "about fifteen minutes ago."

Guthrey jumped to his feet. "Are you telling us, Mr. Strang, that if someone here stole that box, he has a fully inflated life raft in his car right now?"

The teacher nodded. "I think we can assume so. That is, if Tom Mulvahey constructed that valve correctly. Suppose we go outside and take a look."

Almost as one man the teachers rushed from the auditorium and headed for the front of the building where Warren Seabert had parked his station wagon. A woman with a shopping bag under one arm was standing beside the vehicle, looking incredulously through the window.

"I was just passing by," she said, wide-eyed, "when I looked in and saw that big yellow thing kind of growing out of that little brown box."

The rubberized canvas raft lay upside down, completely filling the wagon's cargo area. It had jammed the canvas duffel bag against the rear window, and the onlookers saw that one seam of the bag had burst open.

Mr. Strang spotted Jim Whitiker, who was looking from the raft-filled station wagon to

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a grim, red-faced Warren Seabert. "Why, Warren?" the department head was saying. "I was ready to back you to the hilt, but I can't ignore this damn life raft. Why did you do it?"

"For the bread, man. The money. Did you ever try to make ends meet on a beginning teacher's salary?"

Whitiker looked about at the assembled Aldershot High School faculty. "Yes," he said without emotion, "I guess we all have. Sure it gets tight sometimes, but none of us ever thought that stealing was the answer."

Mr. Strang felt someone pluck at his sleeve. It was the woman with the shopping bag who had first seen the raft in the station wagon. "What an odd thing that is," she breathed. "Do you suppose it's some kind of safety device?"

"No," said the teacher. "I'd sooner think it's some new kind of burglar alarm."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

NEDRA TYRE

Miss Mary Allthorpe, reduced in circumstances in her old age, with the days of gentility and graciousness, of elegance and beauty, far in the past, had only one bright season in the year—spring, ten days of each spring when "once again, as in her girlhood, she went to great houses . . . Life had stripped her of every pleasure except the spring house tours" in Virginia and South Carolina. An engrossing story . . .

YOU CAN'T TRUST ANYONE

by NEDRA TYRE

Mary Allthorpe woke in terror. She was ill.

Or perhaps it was only weakness from hunger. In saving for her annual trip she had not left much money for food.

She went to the kitchenette which had been improvised from one of the two shallow closets in the room and searched the shelves. There was nothing to eat, not a crumb.

She stumbled back to bed. Her head was a great balloon which she must not allow to burst.

"Mama!" she cried. "Papa! Sister!"

They had all been dead for years. She had no one but herself. And she had to take the trip. Everything depended on it.

It was hard to ask for a favor, but she was compelled to. Most of the tenants in the roominghouse were transients. The few permanent ones weren't at all friendly.

There was no choice but to ask Mrs. Trumpitt if she could use her telephone to order groceries.

Mary inched her way down the long hall to Mrs. Trumpitt's rooms.

Mrs. Trumpitt pelted questions through the eighth-of-an-inch crack in her door and finally grunted reluctant permission, with the warning that she was expecting an important

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call and Mary Allthorpe was not to take long.

Imagine such rudeness!

Mary Allthorpe's own family had been so accommodating that if a neighbor had appeared wan at their doorway they would have taken her in until she had fully recovered. Or if the ailing neighbor had preferred to stay in her own place one of them would have gone to look after the ill person until she was well again. Mary Allthorpe had been taught that one granted a favor as if it were a favor to be asked to grant one.

Mary Allthorpe edged past the threatening hulk of Mrs. Trumpitt to spin the dial, but her trembling fingers summoned the Throckmorton Funeral Home before she managed to control them into correctly dialing the All-Fresh Grocers. She specified the limited items of her modest order and the grocer had boomed that no deliveries could be made on orders under a five-dollar minimum.

Five dollars!

Mary Allthorpe was astonished. Her trip was calculated to the last penny. She did not dare take any of the money set aside for it. She apologized and canceled the order.

Mrs. Trumpitt was not visible and Mary Allthorpe peered around several half-opened doors in an attempt to offer thanks for the use of the telephone; but she could not find Mrs. Trumpitt and called out her gratitude so loudly in the hope of reaching her benefactress wherever she might be that it gave Mary a fit of coughing.

She returned to bed in dismay. I can't lie here and die, she thought. I must have some milk. Her mind even gamboled to the wholly unattainable vision of fruit—the nectar of a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice; a bowl heaped with strawberries; a handful of luscious plums.

She opened her purse. Two dollars were in it. That was more than enough for milk, tea bags, sugar, and a lemon.

Dizziness and need made her bold and desperate. She would ask Mrs. Shawnell to shop for her—Mrs. Shawnell never hesitated to ask Mary to do errands.

Mrs. Shawnell was even more unwilling than Mrs. Trumpitt to open her door and she grudgingly agreed to shop for Mary later in the morning when she left to buy her own groceries. Mary specified what she wanted and gave Mrs. Shawnell the two dollars.

Every sound in the house made echoes and reverberations. At eleven Mary heard

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Mrs. Shawnell's handcart being trundled down the hall, then heard it bound down the stairs like an exuberant child.

Mary had fallen into an uneasy sleep and was wakened by a thump on the door. Mrs. Shawnell stood there, thrusting a paper bag toward Mary. The carton of milk had pierced the bag and was about to fall. Mary grabbed it and thanked Mrs. Shawnell.

There must have been change. There had to be, but Mrs. Shawnell did not offer any and Mary lacked the courage to ask for it.

She poured a glass of milk and gulped it down and then poured another and slowly sipped it while she made a cup of tea heavily laced with lemon and sugar.

She had been panic-stricken. Now her courage was back.

The rest of the year depended on her being fit these next ten days. She must stay healthy. She had to take her trip and the houses she visited were open to the public only during brief periods in the spring.

Her room was as bare and uncluttered as her life. There was a narrow bed with a thin mattress. There was no rug and the walls were unadorned except for a small mirror hanging above a dressing table. Once pictures of her relatives had stood on the bureau, but she had banished the photographs into a drawer after selling their ornate frames. Once there had been keepsakes and what she considered knick-knacks which she had sold literally for bread, not knowing their value until it was too late. Pennies had been thrust at her in exchange for small treasures. She had learned too late not to trust anyone.

At least her loved ones had been safe in their graves for years and she had spring in Virginia and South Carolina to enjoy. Not spring exactly, but ten days of it. For those ten days each spring she once again, as in her girlhood, went to great houses, and though she was no longer an invited guest she was a guest of sorts.

Life had stripped her of every pleasure except the spring house tours. Sometimes the hostesses, who were volunteer guides, called out a mild reprimand to her when she loitered or strayed into another room ahead of the rest of the group or lingered too long in a garden. The houses seemed to cry out at such treatment of a guest. Imagine being herded through a gracious dwelling!

Occasionally there was time to linger, to sit in a chair and contemplate a painting or a

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chandelier or to pause at a window to watch the play of a fountain on a terrace. Some hostesses sensed her deep interest and appreciation and indulged her by letting her dawdle when the crowds weren't too large.

Mary Allthorpe traveled by bus and there was no direct route to any of her destinations. There were long waits between bus connections when she sat on hard benches in dirty stations. Sometimes her head bobbed in sleep and she had waked more than once to find a hand slyly exploring her pocketbook. You had to be watchful and apprehensive every second. You simply couldn't trust anyone. Never mind, the visits to the houses made all the risks and complications worthwhile. She could live for the rest of the year on the memories of the trip.

She shuddered as she looked at the chair piled with public-library books on the subjects of furniture, crystal, porcelain, and silver. Suppose she hadn't got her strength back immediately and had lain ill in bed for days! How on earth could she have paid an overdue fine? They must go back to the library at once. She packed the books into two sturdy shopping bags, balancing the weight. She was as adept as a coolie at distributing loads so that they could be most easily carried.

It was providential that she enjoyed walking and seldom had an errand that required bus fare. She waited in line at the Return Desk of the library and after she handed in her books she went to the Art Department and asked for reference texts on Eighteenth Century American and English silver. She made some notes and then she scanned the current issues of *Antiques*, *The Connoisseur*, and *Apollo*.

She liked being knowledgeable about furniture and art objects after all those long years of ignorance. There was added pleasure now to her tours of homes when she recognized works of particular artisans and periods. What babes in the woods she and her family had been! When they had lived among their own treasures they had taken them for granted. Everything was loved because it had been passed along from generation to generation or had been acquired to honor someone on a particular occasion.

No one knew anything about the origins or the makers. Chinese export china wasn't identified as such, or a Sèvres vase or a Hilliard miniature or a Nathaniel Locke silver porringer or a Fabergé umbrella handle. Where were all those treasures

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now? Her mother had disposed of them in batches—she had had no idea of their worth, only that they would bring a little money and therefore must be sold. Poor ignorant lamb! And Mary had been equally naive in selling the last few belongings.

Everything had been lost because Mary's father had trusted the manager of his estate and the manager had not been a man who could be trusted. Some people can pick themselves up—adversity and treachery act as spurs to recoup. The Allthorpes did not belong to that breed. There had been plenty to overflowing in her youth. Now there was poverty that pinched more and more in her old age.

Never mind. She had her trip every spring to keep her going.

When she returned home from the library she pulled her suitcases from the top shelf of the closet. They were rather large but not too big to fit in the overhead racks of buses. Nowadays there were no porters—not that she wasn't happy to tug at the bags herself to keep from having to tip. Occasionally young men or gallant older men offered to help her raise them to the rack or take them down, but she couldn't count on that.

Mercifully the long trip to South Carolina was over. From one time to the next she forgot how arduous it was—her feet and legs got cramps, and it was embarrassing to find herself asleep against a stranger's shoulder when the lights in the bus flared suddenly as if for an interrogation and the driver's voice whipped across the sleep-sprawled passengers to announce a rest stop.

But it was worth every twinge of discomfort.

The pleasure and excitement had begun. She paid her entrance fee and walked into a great hall to join a group waiting to begin a tour. She wandered in bliss from the drawing room into the library.

Then out of the blue the strangest thing happened. At first she couldn't believe it. She had never seen anything like it before. When the hostess directed the group into the dining room, Mary Allthorpe lingered in the morning room and saw a man tiptoe to a small table which held, among other valuables, a Bow porcelain flower girl. The man leaned over, hesitated, then turned around. With a very confident smile he walked toward Mary Allthorpe. Her glance inventoried the objects on the table. The figurine of the flower girl was no longer among them.

The man bowed slightly as if

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to ask permission to pass. With a melodramatic gesture Mary Allthorpe extended her arms so that she barricaded the entrance to the dining room.

"It is a beautiful piece, isn't it?" she said.

He frowned as if he didn't understand her gibberish.

"The Bow porcelain figurine, the one that was on that table."

He could not deny it. With utmost composure he took the figurine out of his pocket and put it back on the table, and then he pulled Mary Allthorpe's right hand from the doorway as if it were a gate and swept past her.

The encounter unsettled her, and the rest of the house tour was wasted. She could not help looking at the man, and as the group moved from room to room he flippantly returned her glance and roguishly held out open hands to indicate that he had taken nothing.

At the front door the hostess said goodbye to Mary's group and greeted another that had gathered on the porch. Mary Allthorpe was terrified that the man would loiter and say something nasty, but he pushed by and ran down the steps and onto the street as if she might pursue him to lecture him on honesty.

She did something she had never done before. Late that afternoon she returned to tour the same house. She really ought not to have spent another dollar, but the earlier tour had been ruined by the man. She hoped it wouldn't startle the hostess to have someone repeat a tour so soon, but luckily another hostess was on duty. This one was quite different in her presentation and had a greater store of anecdotes about previous owners.

In the morning room the other tourists were laughing at one of the hostess' jokes, but Mary Allthorpe did not pay attention. She walked over to the little figurine of the flower girl and smiled as if she were greeting an old and beloved friend. How thrilling it was to see it unharmed and in its rightful place!

The ten days raced by, and then it was all over. This year's trip had ended. She was an elderly Cinderella dragging herself back to the squalor of the roominghouse. She entered the dark front hall and her nostrils were assailed by the familiar smells of cabbage and fish. The dinginess of her room affronted her after the elegance and beauty of the houses she had visited in Virginia and South Carolina.

Never mind, another spring would come. Now she needed a good night's rest. She must see

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Mr. Wadlington tomorrow . . .

Mary Allthorpe walked into Mr. Wadlington's shop with her usual unease. Tables and chairs were crowded with objects and the jumble and disarray were especially distasteful after all the artful arrangements she had been admiring.

Mr. Wadlington was much younger than Mary, but now as she approached the dark cubby-hole in back that he called his office she felt like a very small girl going in to see a stern uncle who, if her remarks were pleasing enough, would reward her with a nickel for a lollipop. There was no one else in the shop and the bell above the door to the front entrance had jangled when she entered. He had to be aware of her approach because she knew he bobbed up every time the bell rang to see who had come inside.

She halted just outside the door and waited. After a while, as if her presence surprised him, he said, "Oh, it's you, Miss Allthorpe. What pretty family treasures have you brought me today?"

He did not rise, nor did he reach out to help her with the suitcase.

She stooped to unlock the bag and opened it to reveal its contents of heavily wrapped objects. She gripped one of the pieces in both hands while she glanced solicitously for a place to set it safely among the clutter on Mr. Wadlington's desk. He cleared a space in front of him and took the package, then tore the tissue paper from it. His fingers tapped impatiently.

Mary Allthorpe looked at him with apprehension. His beard was much longer than when she had last seen him and it made him appear sinister. Not that she disliked beards. All the Allthorpe men had worn beards and she had loved every hair on their chins. It was that slit-eyed, thin-lipped, nostril-sniffing attitude of Mr. Wadlington.

Then he said something, a sort of hmmm—not even a word—which she realized meant that he had anticipated something more saleable. That strange noise or comment, whatever it was, dissipated all the joy of her spring trip.

"Well," he said, "let's see the other pretties," and his tone was even more patronizing, but with each piece the glint of avarice in his eyes grew brighter and he held his breath at the beauty of the Bow porcelain flower girl.

"What a pity, Miss Allthorpe, that you have to dispose of your family belongings. I know it wrenches your heart." He sniggered and began

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to laugh out loud. The shop resounded with his laughter.

He should not have laughed. He ought to have kept up the charade. When she had first come to him she had sold him, reluctantly and piece by piece, the pitifully few family heirlooms she had managed to keep. Admittedly that had been some years ago. But as long as she had intimated to him without actually lying that what she had subsequently brought in had belonged to her, he should have indulged her. After all, he was the one who had reaped the real profit.

He did not wait for her to say anything. With great effort he controlled his laughter, though little hoots and snickers still betrayed his glee.

"Now then, I'll have to pay the piper. Let me see what this comes to."

The good uncle was about to give the timid child money for her lollipop.

She bent over to check the figures he had jotted on the back of an envelope.

He should not have laughed. He should not have shamed her. Yet she was to blame. If over the years she had learned that there was no one to trust, she should have learned to trust herself. It was time she began. She had only herself to depend on.

"Isn't your price a little low for that snuffbox?" Her voice was authoritative. Its tone impressed Mr. Wadlington as much as it impressed herself. "Only last month one very much like it was auctioned at Parke-Bernet for two thousand dollars. But I don't need to tell you that. I'm sure you have prices and records not only from Parke-Bernet but from Christie's and Sotheby's and Bonham's and all the other auction houses."

"Let me remind you, Miss Allthorpe, that I always set the prices in our dealing."

"Until now you have, Mr. Wadlington. You've taken advantage of my ignorance and poverty."

The uncle was stunned by what the impertinent niece had said.

Mary Allthorpe realized that it was long past the time for their relationship to change. She was the older and the one who took all the risk. Authority rightfully belonged to her. If Mr. Wadlington had suspected there was something irregular about the source of the art objects she brought in, it was up to him to make sure. His laughter proved that he had known the articles did not belong to her, and a man in his profession was without doubt fully aware of the penalties for

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disposing of stolen property.

Mr. Wadlington flinched beneath her stare.

He had been about to pay her, as usual, from his wallet. Instead he pushed himself up from his desk, stumbled through the clutter and disorder of the floor, and cursed as he lost his balance. In a corner of the room he flung books from a shelf, then pulled a loose panel from the wall, and began to dial the combination of his safe.

Mary Allthorpe counted the money when Mr. Wadlington thrust it at her, and then said quietly, "Please don't think I'm greedy, but since we both know the value of the pieces I've just brought in, I'll have to ask you for two thousand dollars more." Her manner was gracious and ladylike, but her gaze was steady and purposeful. Moments later when her small right hand enclosed the large additional bills she said, "Thank you very much, Mr. Wadlington. I hope you'll have a nice day—and I'll see you next spring."

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W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM AND THE RIVIERA ROBBERS

by THEODORE MATHIESON

Four o'clock at Villa Mauresque was teatime for W. Somerset Maugham, when he would often sit on his terrace sofa, legs tucked under in Buddha style, gazing inscrutably though the sculptured yews at the blue wash of the Mediterranean. Today, as I placed the warm scones, wrapped in a heated napkin, on the table beside him, he gave me one of his rare direct looks, usually reserved for close friends with whom he felt less shy.

"You've d-done your work quite well, Miss Joslyn," he said with his characteristic stammer. "Not only in the typing, but in such an important task as s-serving the scones properly warm."

"I consider that generous praise, Mr. Maugham," I said. "Especially since you nearly dismissed me at first sight for merely being a woman."

"A man gets crotchety in his sixties. Having been served by male amanuenses for nearly twenty-five years, I can scarcely entertain the possibility of even temporary feminine assistance—even when the agency recommends someone as highly as they did you. But I confess that what decided me in your favor was that your eyes reminded me of someone very dear to me."

"Could it have been your mother, Mr. Maugham? I see her photograph by your bedside each morning when I bring you the typescript."

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"Quite right. Many of your movements remind me of her, too, as well as your quickness of mind. My m-mother was a delightful person, and very loving, and I lost her when I was very young."

He sighed, then said briskly, "When Gerald comes out of the hospital next month I shall be sorry to lose you. But meanwhile I feel confident about asking you to perform a service that goes, perhaps, beyond the call of duty. Have you ever been m-married, Miss Joslyn?"

"When I was eighteen, to a young man at the University of New York. But the marriage didn't last, and I've been on my own ever since."

"And d-do you, since you are a most attractive woman, find yourself falling in love easily?"

"Put it this way, Mr. Maugham. In your play, *The Constant Wife*, a daughter wonders if she is really in love with her husband. Her mother asks her, 'Do you mind using his toothbrush?' 'I wouldn't think of it,' the daughter says, to which the mother replies, 'Then you don't love him.' Well, not since my marriage have I found a man's toothbrush I would willingly share."

"Excellent. You have objectivity and humor, so I might expect you not to be taken in by a handsome face. For over supper tonight I want to use your intuition about a guest—one Florian Hale."

"Have you already made up your own mind about him?"

"I have not even met him. But he's been s-sending me fan letters from the states for the past five years, most of which I've answered, although I do not see in his writing any reflection of an unusual quality of mind. But he does have persistence, and has succeeded in getting my old play publisher, Monteaux, as well as other Parisian friends, to urge me to invite him here. They all say he is most personable, young, handsome, and he claims to be a playwright, although I've heard not a single word about his professional accomplishment. But for a man to get others to act in his behalf without proving his worth, requires *something*, and I'm extraordinarily curious to find out what it is."

"Perhaps he is very rich and has influential connections."

"On the contrary, Hale admits to being a poverty-stricken young hopeful who has recently come to Paris to see if he can get some of his work accepted. And, most curious of all, he has not even once asked me to read a sample of his work."

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"He could be a common crook interested only in stealing some of your objets d'art."

"A crook, perhaps, but not so common if he impressed some of my blasé friends. So I d-decided to invite him, along with his wife."

"He's married, then?"

"And she interests me, too, if only because my friends have scarcely mentioned her."

That afternoon, acting in place of Gerald Haxton, Maugham's male amanuensis, whose stay at a Nice hospital for pneumonia had made it necessary for The Master to engage me, I drove a motor car to the railroad station at Beaulieu to pick up the Hale couple.

Florian Hale was indeed handsome, in the old James Montgomery Flagg fashion, with a breezy smile and a sharply planed jaw line that was then considered a symbol of virility. His wife, Carla, was a darkly pretty little thing who clung to him and seldom spoke.

As I drove through the fishing village of St. Jean, Florian pointed to the yacht anchored off Cap Ferrat, below the gardens of the Villa Mauresque.

"That, I suppose, would be Mr. Maugham's yacht, the *Sara*," he said.

"Have you been on the Riviera before, Mr. Hale?" I asked.

"First time. But I know what to expect at Villa Mauresque, all right. Liveried servants, swimming pool, motor cars by Rolls-Royce and Voisin. I've been reading all about the place for years. And the guest list beats old William Randolph Hearst's, too—H. G. Wells, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Winston Churchill. Tell me, what celebrities might we expect to find here now?"

"None, I'm afraid, besides Mr. Maugham. It's too early in the season, and it looks this year as if many guests aren't coming at all. Because of Hitler, you know." The year was 1939.

Florian fell silent then, as I drove up through the terraced gardens, past blossoming orange and avocado trees, to the tall green doors of the villa, above which, emblazoned on the stuccoed wall, appeared the well-known insignia which was stamped on all Maugham's books and stationery.

"That's a sign against the evil eye," Florian said, pointing, as he helped Carla from the car, and Ernest, the butler, appeared at the door.

"You're quite right," I said. "And so far it has protected Mr. Maugham very well indeed."

Customarily, Maugham

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would have been just inside the hall to greet his guests, but today, for some reason, he was not.

"Mr. Maugham will see Mr. and Mrs. Hale at supper at 7:30," Ernest said, and led the couple to their room in the guest wing.

Which left me time to tend to a few personal matters and consider my first impressions of Florian Hale, which, I'm afraid, were not favorable. Either his ingenuousness was a put-on, or he was stupid. In either case, his presence was not likely to interest Maugham who, I suspected, had invited the young man in the hope of meeting an original character. I thought his hope was doomed.

But I was wrong. Over supper, Florian, responding to Maugham's sensitive probings, became naive to an appalling degree, and Maugham seemed to be showing an increasing interest in him.

"I have looked up to Mr. Maugham as The Master since I was eighteen," Florian said to me, his fork poised over the roast partridge and hot slaw. "At that time I was already drama-struck, and I wanted to produce his play, *The Letter*, with an amateur group. But we had little money, so I wrote him, asking if he'd permit me to do it without paying royalties. Do you remember, Mr. Maugham?"

"I can't say that I do. But then, I receive many letters from my readers."

"Well, you responded with a most courteous letter, giving me permission. Do you know what that meant to an aspiring kid bitten by the stage bug? A hope, irrational perhaps, that one day I might succeed in the theater. I directed play after play, through college and after. I wrote them, too. In fact, that's one reason I came to Paris, to submit my work to Jules Monteaux. The other reason was to make a pilgrimage here."

"How is it, then," Maugham said, "that you have never submitted one of your plays to me?"

"Because, frankly, an adverse opinion from you would annihilate me. I sometimes suspect I am not very good, but to hear *you* say it would destroy all hope. Surely you understand?"

"I think so. The critics have never been too kind to my own work, but I have developed an insulation against them. You must do the same against me."

"I think I can handle the critics—just by *going on*, no matter what, year after year, overwhelming them by sheer output—"

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"As I have done?" Maugham asked with a sly look.

"Well, haven't you? I mean—"

Maugham, clasping his hands, laughed and I thought: He's totally taken in by this callow fashion model!

But I was wrong again. As we had our port on the terrace, overlooking the dusky sea where lights twinkled below us, Maugham said, "I will assume, Mr. Hale, that you have been bone-honest with me. You must p-permit me the same liberty."

"I should welcome it."

"Good. For you must know that I am not accustomed to inviting unknown people to visit me. Will you forgive me for pointing out that you are that?"

"Of course. And my wife and I are eternally grateful for your courtesy."

"I invited you here," Maugham continued, "because I was curious to know how you persuaded such people as Jules Monteaux to write to me in your behalf. Even if he were reading one of your plays, as you say, he would hesitate, I think, to recommend our meeting. And yet he did. So I must assume that he was forcibly struck, as I have been, by your show of vast good will, confidence, and your trust—engaging qualities to meet in these d-days of intrigue. If they are genuine."

"But of course they're genuine! Why should I pretend?"

Maugham took a newspaper clipping from his pocket.

"I read this item just last week. Apparently the Paris police have notified the authorities at Nice that two purloiners of art objects have been operating in southern France—a husband-and-wife team, who through imposture, have gained entrance as guests or domestics to several homes of the wealthy, and made off with art treasures whose total value has been estimated at three hundred thousand pounds. The press refers to the pair as 'the Riviera Robbers.' "

Florian jumped to his feet.

"Are you accusing *us* of being—?"

"I am accusing you of nothing, Mr. Hale. But I do have some valuable Renoirs and Picassos, as well as other objects which might be tempting to such a pair. So this afternoon, after your arrival, I took the precaution of telephoning Jules Monteaux in Paris for a description of you both."

As Maugham paused, both Florian and his wife looked like something frozen in aspic.

"And I'm happy to say," Maugham added blandly, "that

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his description tallies in every respect."

Florian gave a gusty sigh.

"Whew! Mr. Maugham, why did you do that to us? I feel that we should leave your house at once."

"Don't be foolish. I felt obliged to demonstrate that even so-called Masters can be suspicious and unpleasant people, whose judgments, literary or otherwise, are not to be taken too s-seriously."

Later, when the Hales had retired, and only Maugham and I were left on the terrace, he regarded me with a raised eyebrow.

"I think they're phony," I said.

"Perhaps. Jules's description did not quite tally. He was sure Florian was left-handed, and I observed he used his right. Also, Mrs. Hale was blonde when Jules met her. Inconclusive, of course. Florian could be ambidextrous, and Mrs. Hale inconstant about the c-color of her hair."

"Shouldn't you notify the police?"

"I think not. I'll have Emile keep watch tonight. And Jules said he'd be here tomorrow to check their identities."

"Why should you take any risk at all?"

"Really, I don't think there's much risk, but I am rather enjoying what there is."

Around three the next morning, as I lay in my bed listening to the flaccid tide of Mediterranean lapping against the rocks, I thought I heard a distant cry from the garden. But when I noticed, after a little while, that I had failed to open my window, I knew the cry had come from downstairs.

I arose, put on my robe, and stepped out into the hall. The door to Maugham's bedroom, far down the corridor, was wide-open, and a faint light showed. I approached it warily, and rapped lightly on the door frame. When there was no answer I stepped inside. The room was empty, and the covers on my employer's bed were thrown back.

As I descended to the stair landing, Maugham's voice came up from below.

"Come on down, Miss Joslyn, if that is you. The f-fat is in the fire now."

"You weren't in your room," I said, and stopped midway on the stair. The servant Emile, a stocky young Frenchman, lay on the floor of the drawing room, near the grand piano, and Maugham was kneeling beside him.

"I heard him cry out, but he was dead by the time I reached

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him," Maugham said. "To judge by the bleeding, he must have been struck some time ago—by one of those candlesticks on the piano. I tried phoning for the police, but the wire is d-dead. Rouse Ernest and tell him to go to the village at once."

But instead of obeying I stood staring at the bare spaces on the walls.

"The Renoirs are gone, and two Picassos. Also the Boudin in the library and my collection of jade, and heaven knows what else."

"The Hales?"

"I haven't had time to check. Go tell Ernest to fetch the police and then see if the Hales are in their room."

I delivered Maugham's message to Ernest, who hopped into action. Then I went upstairs to the guest wing. When nobody answered to my knock I entered the room.

The twin beds had been slept in, but the Hales were gone.

By the time Jules Monteux arrived around ten next morning, Inspector of Police Lautier, who'd come over from Nice, had questioned all the servants, as well as Maugham and me, and had uncovered some disturbing facts.

The thieves, besides killing Emile, who had doubtless tried to stop them, had not only made off with some priceless objets d'art but had also rifled a large wall safe containing the original manuscript of Maugham's first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, along with a collection of precious stones.

"Also, from evidence on your strip of beach," said Inspector Lautier, "they made their getaway with the loot by a small boat, which took them to a yacht or sailboat anchored off the cape. Everything seems to have been carried off with stopwatch precision, which means the coup was well planned, and the thieves had a thorough knowledge of the Villa Mauresque."

At this point Jules Monteux arrived in his Citroen and came bounding up to us on the terrace—a round-faced, pudgy little Frenchman, all shrug and expostulation. He had heard of the robbery on the car radio, he said, and was devastated that he had recommended the Hales as guests, and hoped Willie (as his friends called Maugham) would forgive him.

"It's possible those two might have been impostors, Jules," Maugham said. "Even so, I would like to know what you saw in Florian Hale that made you want to sponsor him."

"A freshness, Willie, a guilelessness so devastating that

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it rejuvenated my belief in the goodness of the human being."

Inspector Lautier interrupted. "I must leave you," he said. "Now is there anything else you have not told me, Monsieur Maugham?"

"Yes, there is. The photograph of my mother—her last photograph, which she had taken when she knew she was going to d-die, and which I have kept at my bedside since her death fifty years ago—the thieves took that, too."

Lautier stared at Maugham.

"You mean they took the risk of creeping into your very room, monsieur, to steal a personal photograph?"

"Believe me, it was a risk, for I am a very light sleeper, which they must have known, since they seem to have known everything else."

"But why should they steal a photograph of your mother?"

"Because I suspect they also know that I would p-pay the value of what they have stolen, and more, to get that photograph back."

Maugham was right. When the "ransom" letter arrived two days later, he called for me on the intercom from his writing room, which was a kind of penthouse one had to cross a roof to reach.

"Perhaps you ought to read this, Miss Joslyn," he said from his huge writing desk as I entered the book-lined room. "It's from Hale, postmarked at Nice yesterday evening."

The letter he handed me, typed on lined foolscap, read:

Dear Mr. Maugham:

I'm not certain how valuable the photograph of your mother is to you, but from what I can discover there is no negative or copy extant; so unless I receive $50,000 (fifty thousand dollars) in American currency by the night you receive this letter, Wednesday, the photograph will be thrown into the Mediterranean. Order the crew of the *Sara* to berth the yacht at Villefranche and leave it by sunset. Only Miss Joslyn, who seemed to me to be a competent young woman, is to be aboard. Sometime in the night I shall make contact with the yacht, but if there is any attempt to notify the police or interfere with the exchange of the photograph for the cash, Miss Joslyn will suffer the consequences, and the photograph will be destroyed.

Florian Hale

"I do not wish to p-put you in any danger, Miss Joslyn," Maugham said, "even though the photograph means more to me than all my art treasures put together."

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"Nonsense," I replied. "I'll be glad to do it. But mightn't it be better to have police protection?"

"No, the money is of no consequence. Your welfare is. We must follow the instructions."

"It's settled, then." I started to leave, then pointed to the sheets of paper spread out on his desk.

"Will there be any typing this morning?"

"Not while I'm trying to unravel this robbery in my mind. It's rather like plotting a novel, you know, and I'm aware of certain inconsistencies that keep the story from jelling. Will you please telephone Inspector Lautier and ask him to come here this afternoon?"

"Then you will ask for police protection?"

"No. Inspector Lautier will have nothing to do with the photograph deal. *That's* a secret between us."

"Then—"

Maugham gave me one of his rare warm smiles.

"I just want to talk to the Inspector about the man who calls himself Florian Hale. A f-fascinating character for a story!"

"First of all," Maugham said to the Inspector as we all sat by the swimming pool that afternoon, "should we accept the Florian Hale and his wife who came here as the real Hales, or were they impostors? If they were not impostors, then Florian and his wife must be the team that has been plaguing other villas during the past year."

"With the help of Monsieur Monteux," said the Inspector, "we have discovered that Florian and Carla Hale arrived in Paris on the fifteenth of last month. They had never been in France before and are exactly what they claimed to be—two young people seeking to gain a foothold in the theater."

Jules bobbed his head, all smiles.

"Then we must assume that I entertained the impostors." Maugham clasped and unclasped his hands. "In that case, Inspector, where are the real Mr. and Mrs. Hale?"

"Either kidnaped en route to the Riviera, or murdered and their bodies hidden," Lautier said. "I have had their descriptions broadcast in every city and town south of Paris."

"May you find them alive and well. Meanwhile, why did the impostors, on the night of the robbery, climb into their separate beds? Miss Joslyn reported to me that their beds had been slept in, and I checked later and verified it. Is it

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c-customary, Inspector, for burglars to have a hearty sleep before they relieve their host of his prized possessions?"

"Cold-blooded professionals might do just that," the Inspector said with a smile.

"Would cold-blooded professionals jeopardize their entire operation by sneaking into my bedroom and stealing the photograph of my mother? The chances of my waking up, I estimate, were about ten to one."

"Perhaps they thought the price for its return was worth the risk. I'm surprised you haven't heard from them before this."

Maugham looked blandly in my direction and continued, "N-now, I grant these thieves might have learned the layout of the villa from books and articles, but to my knowledge no biography or personal report ever mentioned the photograph of my mother which stood on my night table, nor the monetary value I might put on it."

"Forgive me, Monsieur, but servants will talk. Also, a discerning person reading your novel, *Of Human Bondage*, and knowing that it is autobiographical—"

"It's not likely, I tell you! The whole affair doesn't plot right. As a picture, it's wrong, as if it were composed of jigsaw pieces from different sets. Can't you see that, Inspector?"

"No, I cannot. The police are now searching all boat harbors, and sooner or later they will find the craft they are looking for. When they do they will catch your two crooks, Monsieur, and with them the loot they have taken. Please try to believe this."

"I can't," Maugham said, rising from his chair. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to my studio and try to deduce exactly what is wrong, and when I do, Inspector, I'll let you know."

Jules Monteux left for Paris around three that afternoon.

"Take good care of Willie, Mademoiselle," he said as we walked to his car. "He's lost without someone watching over him."

"Aren't you going to say goodbye?"

"I did. I risked disturbing him in his studio, even waked him up as I entered, and he didn't blast me with lightning. I'd say he's on to something."

After Monteux was gone, I typed up some correspondence, including a note to the widow of Emile, who lived in Tours, enclosing Maugham's sensitively worded letter of condolence and a generous check. Then I

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made my trip to the village for the afternoon mail.

By the time I returned it was near sunset and Anna served me an early supper, saying that Mr. Maugham would be down from his studio shortly.

But I was standing ready in the vestibule with my overnight bag before he made his appearance.

"It's really too much, asking you to put yourself in jeopardy, Miss Joslyn," he said. "Please feel free to change your mind."

"I wouldn't think of it."

"Then thank you. I have given orders for the captain and his crew to leave the ship, and you shall be alone. Here in this attaché case is the m-money. Simply hand it over without comment. But do nothing impulsive, please."

"I am not the impulsive kind," I said, expecting Maugham to smile. But he didn't.

"I'm afraid impulse destroys more people than it saves," he said, and led me down to the driveway, where a car was waiting to take me to the docks at Villefranche.

It was eerie being on the *Sara* without crew or passengers, even though the yacht rode beside the dock within sight of the village lights. But the pier was long and dark, and it seemed only a slender thread that might easily be snapped.

From somewhere along the boardwalk to my left a jazz band was playing a newly imported Gershwin tune, and out to sea, in the purple dusk, lights of vessels glided slowly by. I started making a slow circuit of the yacht, unable to sit still. An hour passed, then two. Twice I looked into the after cabin, controlling the impulse to enter and lock the doors against the night.

Because for the first time since I told Maugham I would serve as go-between I was nervous. Like him, I sensed something was wrong, that my being here could only end in tragedy for him or me—or somebody. And then, too, what Maugham had said about impulse harming more people than it helped kept popping into my head with a sinister persistence.

Of course, Maugham was always saying such things, and yet—the remark seemed to suggest the movement of unseen forces all around me.

By midnight I was ready to give up and return to the villa. But it was too late. The lights of the village had winked out, one by one, until only the dim streetlamps were left. *Le jazz hot* had ceased, and the way back along the pier looked

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farther and more perilous than ever.

Then at twenty minutes past one I heard the creaking of oarlocks and knew a boat was pulling up along the water side of the *Sara*. I waited until I saw a figure climb to the ladder landing, then I started forward, holding the attaché case in front of me.

"I've got the money," I said. "It's all here."

Suddenly there was the cry of voices and sudden light and the sight of a familiar face, but only for an instant; then I felt a crushing blow on my temple, and I blacked out.

"The man you were giving the money to," a voice was saying gently from somewhere in the room, "was your husband, wasn't he, my dear?—the one you met at college and would share a toothbrush with. You never divorced him, did you? The two of you came to France and started operating together. It was you two who robbed the Villa Mauresque."

"What happened?" I asked, and opened my eyes to see Maugham's lined face looming sadly over me.

"Your husband tried to k-kill you, I'm afraid, so he could keep everything for himself. But the police have him now."

Maugham pointed to a vaseful of peonies on the table beside my hospital bed.

"I brought you some flowers, my dear. I hope you like them."

"You must have been there to save me," I said after a while. "How did you—know?"

"I didn't know your husband intended to murder you. I had the police on the yacht only because I knew you were, as the Americans say, 'in on it.' The Hales—who are now safe, by the way—were, after all, *bona fide* guests; but you and your husband were the 'team'—with you relaying information from the inside, and your husband waiting offstage. When the Hales arrived, you thought the time was ripe; kidnaping them along with stealing the loot would set the police on a false trail. So when your husband imprisoned the Hales on your boat, you had to stay behind to make it look good."

"How did you find out about me?" I whispered.

"Who else could have taken the picture? This afternoon, when Jules came into my studio, I was asleep, and he was most careful not to d-disturb me. Nevertheless I awakened in a flash, instantly convinced that I would have also awakened if anyone had entered my room on the night of the robbery. I

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decided that therefore *no one had.* Then who could have taken the photograph?

"It was on the nightstand when I went to sleep earlier. Then around three o'clock poor Emile's dying cry awakened me, and I went downstairs. *At that time the thief, your husband, had already left the villa with the loot and with the Hales.* Presently I heard you stirring at the top of the stairs and told you to come down. 'You weren't in your room,' you said, which meant you had at least stepped into my room to look.

"Then when I returned to my room at five o'clock, after the police had come and gone, I found the photograph missing. Admit it now, my dear, you took the photograph on impulse, realizing suddenly that here, thanks to my emotional tie, was a bonus? And when you went to the village for the mail, you got in touch with your husband and told him to write a 'ransom' note for the photograph."

"Yes, it's all true."

"The missing photograph made me take a second look at the inconsistencies I mentioned to the Inspector. If the photograph had been taken by someone who entered my bedroom that night, I *would have awakened.* Since I did not awaken, no one entered my room that night. Therefore the Hales were not the thieves. How then did the real thieves gain first-hand knowledge of the layout of the villa? Only through an insider. Only through you, the only newcomer to my staff . . . One question, my dear. What happened to the girl whom the agency sent out to me, and whose place you took?"

"She wanted to go to the United States, and we gave her the money to do it."

Maugham sighed and rose.

"I suppose that's all, my dear. I'm sorry. You *were* very efficient, although, frankly, I shall feel more s-secure with Gerald back on the job. Yes, much more s-secure."

"Q"

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IN AN OUTPOST OF EMPIRE

by JACOB HAY

It never ceased to delight Bootworthy that his Residency should be, year in and year out, officially described by Her Britannic Majesty's Foreign Office as a hardship post (and, strictly unofficially, of course, as one of those posts reserved for that dimmish few whose superiors had quietly given them up as dead losses in the demanding profession of international diplomacy). Superficially, the facts supported the Foreign Office, and the "hardship" rating guaranteed that nobody in his right skull would ever voluntarily seek to replace Bootworthy.

Of all the Trucial States that lie along the southern coast of the Persian Gulf, none is bleaker and more forbidding in aspect than the miniscule Sheikhdom of Qad al Akh, the capital (and only) city and chief port of which is Gad Hufel, where the incumbent ruler, Sheikh Ibn Sadak (affectionately known as "The Damned") governs, with an iron hand and a kind of benign ferocity, his 32,500 (give or take a few dozen) profoundly apathetic subjects.

The products of this seemingly dismal land have historically included poor quality pearls, a species of date from which several millenia of unskilled cultivation have effectively removed any trace of flavor, and a breed of camels notable throughout the Arabian Peninsula for their ungovernable tempers. The climate has been accurately described as intolerable, with an average

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rainfall of .01 inch per decade.

But it is not oil which accounts for the relative prosperity of Qad al Akh. There is oil on every side, to be sure, and there is almost certainly oil beneath the drab and sandy wastes of Qad al Akh; but Sheikh Ibn Sadak, like his father, Hassan the Wise, and his father's father, Abdul the Mad, has resolutely declined to explore this possibility. "Any fool," he has often been quoted as saying, "can be lucky enough to have oil under the ground, but he is thrice blessed of Allah whose oases bloom with the joy of mankind and the dreams of Paradise."

The reference is not, alas, to the dates, but to what a majority of the world's experts consider to be the finest *Cannabis sativa* grown anywhere in the world. It is this minination's sole export, and its cultivation, in a string of oases bordering on the Empty Quarter, is a monopoly of the ruling family which, over the years, has plowed the profits of this enterprise back into wives, concubines, improvements to the vast royal palace at Gad Hufel, and what may be the largest privately owned fleet of Rolls-Royce limousines between Bahrein and Oman.

The abundance of *Cannabis sativa* allows the entire population of Qad al Akh to spend their lives quietly stoned, thus insuring a tranquillity rare in that oft-troubled area. To have this amiable situation disturbed by the heavy boots, bulldozers, and drilling rigs of the world's oil prospectors was, in the view of the Sheikhs of Qad al Akh, unthinkable.

The British Residency in Gad Hufel, established in the Nineteenth Century during the reign of Queen Victoria, had become irrelevant and immaterial as early as 1912, but the British Foreign Office is slow to change, and the Residency was allowed, almost absentmindedly, to continue its vague and useless existence, housed in an enormous echoing granite villa overlooking Gad Hufel's Marine Parade (Sheikh Abdul the Mad had been a staunch admirer of the Widow of Windsor, and had so renamed what had formerly been The Street of the Dead Camel) and the waters of the Persian Gulf.

At the time of the events described in this narrative the Residency's British staff had been reduced to a total of four. They were: The Hon. Adrian Bootworthy, the Resident; Major Fergus, The MacNaughton of That Ilk, the military attaché and military adviser to Sheikh Ibn Sadat; Mr. Cyprian Pertwee, M.A. (Oxon.), the

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cultural attaché and personal tutor to Prince Gamal, eldest legitimate son of Ibn Sadak; and Pte. Hubert Rumples, Major MacNaughton's batman, who also served as the Residency's majordomo, supervising the large and lethargic staff of native servants. Each (with the exception of Pte. Rumples, whose record was spotless) had been assigned to Qad al Akh for the kind of reasons that got people assigned to Qad al Akh.

Thus, Adrian Bootworthy had been singled out when, as a Third Secretary at the British Embassy in Stockholm, he had somehow mismanaged his dessert spoon as to send an icy globule of lemon sherbet spinning into the awesome decolletage of the wife of the Swedish Foreign Minister at an Embassy luncheon. Major, The MacNaughton of That Ilk, had gravely troubled his superiors in Whitehall when he had turned his company of Scots Guards to the *right* (as opposed to the left) on marching out of the forecourt of Buck House on the completion of the Changing of the Guard, resulting in a traffic tie-up which took five hours to untangle, since the London police were totally unprepared for this unprecedented troop movement. It was not a court-martial offense, but it marked the Major as Qad al Akh material. Cyprian Pertwee, while deemed sound on such subjects as the works of Bach and Purcell, the paintings of Rembrandt and Gainsborough, and English Literature in general, had cut himself off from the academic and cultural mainstream by his single-minded insistence that the Earth was, in fact, quite flat, as any fool could plainly see.

Perhaps happily all were bachelors, with no close family ties to call them home. Their paychecks arrived with praiseworthy regularity, and they were in general agreement that, despite the heat, disease, poverty, and polluted water, life in Gad Hufel was not at all bad. From time to time the even tenor of Residency life was interrupted by an invitation to dine at the palace of Ibn Sadak. These affairs were regarded much as were natural disasters, and entailed scooping up great greasy chunks of roasted lamb in one's right hand, occasionally coming across the odd eyeball—a supreme delicacy—with the consequence that after such banquets the neon-lit dining chamber ended up looking like serious bomb damage in a sewage-disposal plant.

So an invitation to the palace was a duty to be borne

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as bravely as tne diarrhea which inevitably followed. This affliction, however, could be endured, even dismissed, by a few puffs on a pipe packed with Grade A No. 1 Royal Special Reserve Hashish, of which each member of the staff recieved a five-pound, gift-wrapped box on the occasion of the Sheikh's birthday.

The day-to-day operations of the Residency were left largely in the hands of Pte. Rumples, who was unique in Qad al Akh in being a pearl of great price. In the course of his duties he had managed to teach Mohammed, the native cook, to prepare such homely delicacies as roast camel, brown Windsor soup, and trifle. He had taught the houseboys how to make a proper taut-sheeted bed and how to bone boots to a mirror finish.

Like his superiors, Pte. Rumples was a bachelor, a condition he assuaged with a variety of hobbies. He was addicted to painting by the numbers, purchasing his kits from the United States, with the result that the Residency numbered among its various assortments a number of his meticulous renditions of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Renoir (his was a catholic taste), and during his first few years in the Sheikhdom he had found satisfaction in the construction of plastic model airplanes, but it was a short-lived satisfaction, since the planes tended to melt, Dali-style, in the shimmering heat of Gad Hufel.

His real satisfaction came, however, from his splendid collection of true-crime magazines, especially those published in the United States, and in this area of study he was something of an expert. He knew, and could describe in excruciating detail, the exact circumstances surrounding the betrayal of John Dillinger by the Woman in Red, and he had theories as to the fate of Judge Crater.

From time to time his superiors would urge upon him the advantages and delights of sampling some less sordid type of literature: Bootworthy strongly recommended the plays of William Shakespeare; Cyprian Pertwee suggested that he might find pleasure in the writings of James Joyce, while The MacNaughton felt that Rumples might improve himself culturally and professionally by a study of the writings of Clauswitz. But Pte. Rumples continued to remain faithful to his true tales of crime and criminals.

"You never can tell, sir," he would reply to his superiors when they chided him for his simplistic tastes in reading, "but

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it might come in handy some fine day."

It was an argument for which his superiors could find no ready rebuttal.

What was to disturb this placid way of life was a development none could have foreseen, and this was the discovery of *Cannabis sativa* by increasingly affluent American college students and their bored suburban parents. It did not take long for the word to pass among them that out of the East, from somewhere in far Araby, there came a *Cannabis* of such exquisite excellence as to make the Mexican variety seem like so much inflammable breakfast cereal, and the domestic product beneath contempt. It was reputed to travel by camel and dhow from the shores of the Persian Gulf via Naples to the New World, and it was, of course, the incomparable harvest of the oases of Qad al Akh.

American sales soared to heights undreamed of, and in the light of this spectacular benefaction, although no Sheikh of Qad al Akh had ever traveled beyond his own borders, Ibn Sadak announced his intentions of dispatching Prince Gamal, accompanied by Cyprian Pertwee, as tutor and chaperon, to the United States to see what manner of land this was that gave so bounteously of its wealth into the coffers of the Sheikhdom.

"Congratulations, Cyprian," Bootworthy said to his colleague, on hearing the news. "They always say that travel broadens."

"We shall fall off the edge, mark you my words," Pertwee replied moodily, his expression somber.

"Nonsense, old boy," protested Major MacNaughton heartily, as the three of them sat on the Residency's veranda enjoying their daily sundowner, with Pte. Rumples hovering discreetly in the background smart in his white mess jacket. "If the Royal Navy can get there, as I understand they do from time to time, so jolly well can you. You must send us the occasional postcard. Rumples! I see the Resident's glass is empty."

"Sah!" barked Pte. Rumples, and leaped to his duty.

So, in due course, Prince Gamal and Mr. Pertwee, accompanied by a mountain of luggage, took dhow for Bahrein, whence they would begin their journey by a chartered airliner to the United States. The use of air transportation had considerably soothed and eased Mr. Pertwee's mind, since it meant that if they were unlucky enough to fly out over the edge

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of the Earth, it would still be possible to turn around and fly back to safety.

"We shall miss Pertwee," Bootworthy observed gravely as he and The MacNaughton of That Ilk repaired to The Prince Consort Hotel, the only establishment of its sort in the Sheikhdom, which had been built as an exact replica of a Scottish castle, a photograph of which Sheikh Abdul the Mad, still in the thrall of Queen Victoria, had seen and admired in *The London Illustrated News* for the week of April 12, 1901. It had been intended to house distinguished foreign visitors, and was the only place in Gad Hufel where alcohol might be consumed in public.

"Cuts the garrison by one-third," mused The MacNaughton in professional appreciation of the situation. "But we shall carry on, of course."

"Of course," agreed Bootworthy, signaling a waiter to fetch tea.

Under the hotel's porte-cochère Pte. Rumples, in pith helmet and starched khakis, waited in patient dignity behind the steering wheel of the 1927 Daimler which was the Resident's official limousine.

Events now followed quickly, one upon the other.

Barely a week later there appeared in the shallow badly silted harbor of Gad Hufel a gleaming white yacht flying the colors of the Italian Republic, which anchored only long enough to send its launch to shore. Lounging luxuriously along the elegantly leather-upholstered stern bench was a swarthy man wearing a creamy Panama hat and a pair of alligator-hide shoes, between which stretched a suit of electric-blue silk, such as the best tailors in Rome can turn out, set off by a shirt of midnight blue and a hugely knotted orange cravat.

From the balcony of the British Residency two pairs of binoculars followed the progress of the launch from yacht to Gad Hufel's solitary stone quay, for it was not just every year that a yacht steamed into harbor to discharge a passenger, and the Residency was appropriately interested.

In short order the newcomer proceeded to reserve the entire second floor, including the Royale Suite, of The Prince Consort Hotel. On the hotel's registry he signed himself boldly, "Giovanni Caliaferi," and gave his residence as Naples, Italy.

In this wise there arrived in Qad al Akh one Johnny Cauliflower, as he was better known to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, which

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had been largely instrumental in arrangements for his deportation from the United States to his homeland, and Interpol, which kept a wary eye on his comings and goings after his return to his native Naples.

Less than 24 hours later Bootworthy and The MacNaughton were summoned to the palace for an audience with Ibn Sadak at the unusual hour of 3 P.M., a time during which 99.44 percent of Gad Hufel was taking its postluncheon nap, an hour when the palace was not likely to be filled with a muttering mob of suppliants seeking the Sheikh's favors, when the palace's long corridors were deserted.

The Ibn Sadek who received the Britons in his audience hall was not the princely figure to which they were accustomed: the vulturine features were pale and waxy, and the amber worry-beads clicked through his beringed fingers with the nervous rattle of a miniature machine gun. Beside the Sheikh, in a wood-framed, canvas, officer's campaign chair set on a level with the regal throne, sprawled Johnny Cauliflower who, seen at close range, looked something like a cross between Dean Martin and Victor Mature, with overtones of George Raft and Edward G. Robinson in their prime. A toothpick dangled from the sensual lips, and the black eyes were hooded and dangerous beneath the black brows that contrasted dramatically with the distinguished gray at the temples.

"Gentlemen," began Ibn Sadak without preamble, after the Englishmen had bowed their respects, "permit me to introduce Signor Caliaferi. Signor Caliaferi is—" The Sheikh hesitated.

"An expediter," Johnny Cauliflower supplied graciously. "I get things done, 'fya unnehstan whaddeye mean."

"—er, yes," Ibn Sadak resumed edgily. "He has—ah—brought with him a communication which will explain his presence here, and although it is addressed to me I think you should read it, since it comes from your colleague, Mr. Pertwee." With which Ibn Sadak extended a sheet of notepaper toward Bootworthy.

"My dear Sheikh," Bootworthy read, "the bearer of this letter is a Signor Caliaferi, who is the representative of an Italo-American consortium of businessmen, of which His Highness, Prince Gamal, and I are presently the involuntary guests somewhere in the United States. It is the consortium's desire to improve the economy of Qad al Akh by the increased

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production, more scientific processing, and modern packaging and shipping techniques of *Cannabis sativa*, of which project Signor Caliaferi is to have sole charge. While His Highness and I are presently comfortable, albeit with only limited freedom of movement, we have been advised that our condition could change drastically if Signor Caliaferi's suggestions are not carried out to the letter. Otherwise, we have been assured that we will, in the colorful language of our hosts, 'end up with wooden overcoats,' whatever that may mean. I have the honour to remain, Your Highness, your obedient servant,

Cyprian Pertwee, M.A."

"Hmmm," said Bootworthy, passing the letter to The MacNaughton, who read it carefully, brushing a finger beneath his flaring Guards mustache as he absorbed the contents.

"Hmmm," said The MacNaughton.

"My frens and me, we kinda figured this whole operation could use a little American know-how," Johnny Cauliflower explained, shifting his toothpick. "Natcherly, we gotta charge like a consultant's fee, y'unnerstan. The Sheek here says you're his top advisers, so I wanned you gents to read this letter so's you could advise him to do like I say, or"—and here Mr. Cauliflower drew a lean forefinger gracefully across his cravat—"else."

"Else, eh?" Bootworthy murmured.

"Else," repeated Johnny Cauliflower coldly.

Returned to their Residency, Bootworthy and The MacNaughton sat down to assess the situation over whiskey and soda. That the situation was fraught with problems was unhappily clear. An American takeover of *Cannabis sativa* production would be as disruptive as the discovery of oil under the fertile oases of Guq and Guq Guq (in the matter of place names, the natives of Qad al Akh have historically displayed little or no imagination), where the finest *Cannabis* grew. Obviously, something would have to be done.

"We must fight fire with fire," declared Bootworthy, when Pte. Rumples had brought them a second round of drinks.

"Adapt ourselves to the native ways," said The MacNaughton, recalling what he had learned at Sandhurst of Braddock's Defeat. "Adopt their methods, as it were."

"One wonders how the late Al Capone might have responded to a similar challenge."

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Bootworthy's tone was thoughtful, and then grew angry. "What's more, MacNaughton, this is no ordinary challenge: this, my dear chap, is a challenge to British authority. It must be met."

"Only a few years ago one might have called for a destroyer and a platoon of Royal Marines," replied The MacNaughton wistfully, "but with Aden gone . . ." He left his sentence sadly unfinished. "Nonetheless, Bootworthy, I take your point. One sees one's duty clear. We must act, and with dispatch."

"By George, I think I've got it!" exclaimed Bootworthy, his lean face flushing with unaccustomed excitement. "Rumples! A word with you."

"Sah!" barked Pte. Rumples, stamping to attention.

Sheikh Ibn Sadak had listened with growing unease at dinner that same evening as Johnny Cauliflower had outlined his plans for the future, among them a new cement-block processing and packaging plant, together with a corrugated-steel, prefabricated warehouse and the construction of an airstrip for air freight operations. The Sheikh was consequently much relieved when Johnny encountered his first lamb's eye and abruptly decided to take a constitutional from the palace back to the Prince Consort Hotel to regain his composure in the sickly breeze which blew inland every evening from the Persian Gulf.

This job, Johnny decided as he strolled through the dusk, was not going to be the soft touch he and his associates had initially envisioned. Finding an eyeball in the lamb stew can be a distracting experience, and it was doubtless by reason of this distraction that Johnny did not observe the approach of the towering 1927 Daimler limousine until it drew alongside him, its light extinguished.

"Okay, pal," growled Pte. Rumples out of the side of his mouth, "this here is it. Get inna back." Even in the dimly lighted street Johnny could see that the speaker of these words held a revolver of imposing size and that it was pointed steadily at his Islands of Langerhans, which could make for a very painful wound. Dumfounded, Johnny crawled into the Daimler's back seat, where two still figures awaited him. Johnny had a sudden sense of *deja vu*, especially when another gun barrel was pressed firmly into the area of his MacBirney's Point, another anatomically unsuitable target.

"Whaddahell izzis?" he asked hoarsely, knowing full well what the hell it was.

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"Sorry to trouble you, my dear fellow," replied Bootworthy, and these were the last words Johnny was to hear for some time as The MacNaughton of That Ilk bashed him briskly over the skull with the butt of his service Webley, which he had spent most of the early evening in cleaning and polishing to a proper Guards sheen.

Johnny Cauliflower's first sensation on recovering consciousness was that his feet had unaccountably fallen asleep, and he unconsciously wiggled his toes to restore their circulation. This led to the discovery that his feet felt curiously heavy. He found he was seated on a wooden chair in the middle of an otherwise unfurnished room, illuminated by a single naked light bulb dependent from the ceiling.

He glanced down at where his feet should have been and saw that the bottoms of his flawlessly tailored trousers disappeared into the flat round gray surface of a tubful of a substance he could not immediately identify.

"Hey!" he yelled, as realization dawned.

"Ah," said a pleased voice from the shadows behind his chair. "He's come to. A very skillful blow, my dear MacNaughton, I must say."

"Hey!" yelled Johnny Cauliflower yet again, as Adrian Bootworthy and The MacNaughton emerged to stand in front of his chair and peer down at him with kindly curiosity.

The MacNaughton stooped and rapped the substance encasing Johnny's feet with his knuckles. "Quite hard," he announced, arising. "Good show, Rumples; nicely poured."

"Sah!" came the answering yelp from the shadows.

"You should be quite comfortable, Signor," Bootworthy told his guest. "There is a bucket beside your chair to accommodate the requirements of nature, and, of course, you will be fed a simple but nourishing diet."

Bootworthy paused, then walked to the wall facing Johnny's chair, from which protruded the open end of a large pipe. "The chamber we now occupy," he resumed, his voice professorial, "is a cistern, formerly used to contain sea water which, due to the scarcity of potable fresh water, was employed in laundering and floor scrubbing. This pipe runs from the Residency beneath the Marine Parade to a point under the waters of the harbor. The inlet valve is controlled from the floor above us. Do I make myself clear?"

Johnny Cauliflower glower-

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ed fiercely and remained silent.

"Splendid, splendid," Bootworthy went on, beaming. "Well, when we leave you I shall admit, oh, say, six inches of water into this chamber—I'm afraid you'll find it a trifle odoriferous, with lots of bits and pieces floating about—while you can be thinking about the sort of message you will be sending to your colleagues back in the United States ordering the immediate return of Prince Gamal and Mr. Pertwee to Qad al Akh. Oh, and I shouldn't brood overmuch about those bits and pieces; not good for the old morale. Brekkie at seven ack-emma. Until then, good night."

Some minutes later a horrible gray stream began vomiting steadily into the cistern and continued to flow until Johnny was surrounded by a turgid pool of unspeakably aromatic fluid six inches deep, at which point it stopped.

Precisely at seven A.M. the following morning a trap door in the ceiling directly above Johnny's chair opened to disclose the face of Pte. Rumples. "Breakfast is served," he said formally, and lowered a tray to Johnny's waiting, outstretched hands. Johnny took the tray and put it in his lap as the trap door gently closed. Kippers and one slice of toast with marmalade. Across the room the water pipe belched, gurgled, and began doing its thing.

At eight A.M. the trap door was lifted again, this time to reveal the features of Adrian Bootworthy, who wore an expression of concern. "Ready with your message, old chap?" he called into the depths. But Johnny remained adamantly silent. He had not eaten his kippers. Seeing this, Bootworthy tutted and said, "Mustn't neglect our digestions, my dear fellow," as Rumples reappeared to lower the rope with which to raise Johnny's breakfast tray.

It was not for nothing that Johnny Cauliflower was known to his intimates as "Hard Nose," and it was not a lack of determination which had won him his fearsome reputation in and subsequent deportation from the American underworld; but his character weakened when the surface of the pool in which he sat immobile reached the level of his knees that afternoon, and weakened still further when the water pipe choked briefly and then disgorged several objects which defied analysis by the rational mind. The spirit which had once aroused the admiration of the late Dutch Schultz and Legs Diamond finally cracked when the water level reached the bottom of Johnny's rib cage.

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His mighty shouts of surrender would have halted a Roman Legion in mid-charge.

"Excellent decision, Caliaferi, and quite wise," Bootworthy called down when the trap door had been thrown open. "I say, MacNaughton! Caliaferi here's ready to send his message. Have you got that damned wireless transmitter working yet?" Then, as an afterthought, "Rumples, do you have the foggiest idea how we can get this poor devil out of there?"

It was, as the poet wrote, a famous victory. Three days later Prince Gamal and Cyprian Pertwee were once again safely in Gad Hufel. Johnny Cauliflower, his feet still encased in their concrete galosh, had been hoisted aboard a dhow bound for Oman and given a hammer and chisel wherewith to chip himself free during what might otherwise be a boring voyage; and peace and quiet reigned once more in the Sheikhdom of Qad al Akh.

"It was really most frightfully clever of you all," Cyprian Pertwee declared in heartfelt tones as the staff of Her Britannic Majesty's Residency gathered for their first evening sundowner after what had undeniably been a touching reunion.

"It was nothing, actually," Bootworthy understated modestly, in the finest tradition of the Foreign Office.

"Simply took the blighter in the flank, by God," said Major, The MacNaughton of That Ilk, taking an appreciative gulp of his drink. "The Brigade did the same thing at Waterloo, if memory serves."

Bootworthy arose from the depths of his rattan armchair and stood to attention in the shadows of the Residency veranda, his glass raised.

"Gentlemen, the Queen," he toasted.

"The Queen," echoed his two companions, and Pte. Rumples added, "God bless 'er," ever so quietly.

High overhead from the absurd crenellated tower which was the Residency's most inexplicable architectural feature the red, white, and blue St. Andrew's crosses of the British flag fluttered bravely against the darkening dusk.

Another outpost of Empire had defied and survived yet another in the endless succession of challenges to the might and majesty of the Crown.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

The summer doldrums are upon us, drying up most sources. For your entertainment, therefore, I must both begin and end with a time-tested classic: the first a novel featuring our earliest and best scientific detective, the second a book of short stories snake-fanged with clever plots. Between these we shall consider one roaring modern mystery-adventure with espionage overtones, and one modern detective story against so unlikely a background as Finland. Under such circumstances, after all, the doldrums might be worse.

If you are unfamiliar with *The Red Thumb Mark*, by R. Austin Freeman (Norton, $4.50), try the hardcover reissue. First published in 1907, this little masterpiece marked the debut of Dr. John Evelyn Thorndyke, urbane medico-legal investigator, conjuring up practical wizardry at King's Bench Walk.

When young Reuben Hornby is accused of robbing his uncle's safe, with evidence of a bloody thumbprint incontestably his own, even the young man's solicitor advises him to plead guilty and beg for mercy; only Dr. Thorndyke can conceive a defense.

Some unseen presence has determined to eliminate Thorndyke; the attempts on his life are so devilishly ingenious as to be almost foolproof. But the sage can't be trapped. In open court he smashes the Crown's case, nailing the true culprit as he presides over the romance between worthy Dr. Jervis and charming Juliet Gibson. Any innocent who appeals to John Thorndyke is as safe as though he had appealed to Sherlock Holmes.

As a new item in the fast-paced, shoot-'em-up style of mystery-adventure, let there be praise for *The Bearer Plot*, by Owen Sela (Pantheon, $5.95). Nicholas Maasten, London anti-hero of several business ventures, has a certain iron honesty even at dirty work. When from a dubious friend he buys rare postage stamps which may or may not have been stolen, he hopes to reap rich profit by selling the stamps to a nobleman in Spain.

Instead Maasten wallops straight into somebody's deadly plot,

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replete with bearer bonds, gold bars, and a Nazi treasure buried in a lake. Racing across Europe, threat-pursued, he is driven not only by two lovely ladies but by the British cloak-and-dagger bureau which still holds him for blackmail. And behind every machine-pistol lurks that sinister cripple in the wheel-chair.

If Anti-hero Maasten seems hairier and more mod than most readers can approve, he is a good fellow who stands by his friends through any extremity, including a scuba-diving fight in icy water. At the finale he emerges—if not triumphant, at least with profit enough to carry him (let's hope) through another adventure fully as good as this one.

Mistaken souls who regard the people of Finland as heavy or stodgy, considering Helsinki as anything but Fun City, will find in *The Trevick Affair*, by Mauri Sariola (Walker, $4.95), a wild detective *impasse* disrupting the lives of sympathetic human beings whose pulses beat only too fast.

To Osmo Kilpi, idealistic young lawyer, comes the quiet middle-aged couple whom persecution would drive from their modest market garden in the country. Though Arvid Teerisuo and his wife have offended nobody, some unknown enemy burns down their sauna and wrecks their living room with a shotgun. Then murder removes Teerisuo in another fire.

But perplexity deepens when the victim's wife suddenly blossoms into a swinging widow with a young boy friend. Osmo Kilpi and his shapely secretary, Irja Hartti, are swept into a whirl of death which culminates in sensational disclosure.

In conclusion, good brethren, I give you Jacques Futrelle's *The Thinking Machine*. Also belonging to *annus mirabilis* 1907, it contains seven exploits of Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, aided by Reporter Hutchinson Hatch. In "The Problem of Cell 13," a classic, Professor Van Dusen bets he can escape from the condemned cell of a prison; before winning his bet he all but drives the warden mad. Though the other tales can't match this *chef-d'oeuvre*, both "The Scarlet Thread" and "The Flaming Phantom" employ dirty work as unexpected as it is horribly simple.

Jacques Futrelle, despite his Gallic name, was an American newspaperman who fashioned his plots against the staid setting of Boston, Mass., and perished with the *Titanic* in 1912. *The Thinking Machine* is not easy to find; but, believe me, it's worth the search.

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R. R. Irvine's first story, "Lobster Shift," appeared in our March 1973 (32nd Anniversary) Issue. And as has occurred so often in EQMM, a new writer's second story reached us even before we were able to publish his first. Here, then, is another peek—no, another long look—into televisionland, that fabulous realm in contemporary geography. (Note that we did not say wasteland.) And once again you are there, watching a TV broadcast—the Six O'Clock News on Channel Three in California. And this time there is unexpected news—a scoop not in the newscaster's prepared sheets . . .

A HARD WAY TO DIE

by R. R. IRVINE

There's an old adage in television, inherited from the days of radio: approach all microphones as if they were alive, even the dead ones.

Translated, that means swearing in the broadcast studio is tantamount to playing Russian roulette with your career, only worse because more lives than one are at stake.

So it was no wonder my heart lumped in my throat when our charismatic news anchorman, Al Aarons, went berserk during a commercial break. "If that s.o.b. ever steps on one of my lines again," he bellowed, "I'll kill him!"

Luckily for me his air mike was dead; he was booming in over the director's com-line.

Aarons fired another obscenity at Ev West, Channel Three's gabby weatherman, who was second only to the anchorman when it came to egomania.

The trouble with Ev West was he couldn't keep his mouth shut, even to Aarons. No matter what was said, West had to top it. With West one-upmanship was a way of life.

And on the air with Aarons one-upmanship was West's great crusade.

At least once a week Aarons would complain bitterly to me.

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"Hicks," he'd say, "you're the producer, *you* do something about him."

Since hiring the ego-trippers wasn't among my duties, I would mutter something consoling, offer to buy Aarons a drink, and then stay out of his way for a day or two, the average span of his pickled memory.

But at that moment I was the one who needed a drink. "How long is this break?" I asked the director.

"Two minutes," he said.

"Better keep the intercom open and the air mike dead."

The director nodded as Aarons' voice exploded in the control booth. "Hicks," he screamed, then quieted down to my first name. "Tod, I'm through talking about it. I won't go on with that s.o.b. any more. He's ruining my image, my credibility."

I shook my fist at the control-booth monitor but kept my mouth shut.

"Thirty seconds to air," the director warned.

"This coffee smells like—" and West yelled a sharp four-letter word.

"Kill his mike, too," I snapped.

"Worse than an anchorman's breath," West concluded. Then the weatherman drank his coffee in one gulp as usual.

The anchorman went back to his script. As he turned the canary-yellow pages, scowling at each one as if the newswriters were personally out to get him, I wondered what had really set him off. It couldn't have been West. At least I didn't think so. Their exchange had been routine.

Aarons had said, "Well, it's time for the weather and that means Ev West, who's either on a high—or a low."

And West had come back with, "Al, you know there's nothing lower than an anchorman."

A typical West insult—corny, but the audience loved it. Aarons had overreacted. I decided he must be hitting the bottle pretty hard and checked his eyes. Sure enough, they were glittering more than usual, more than his key-light would account for. Definitely a 90-proof glitter.

With ten seconds to air Aarons snapped, "Now look. That idiot's out here clowning around." A volley of more Anglo-Saxon four-letter words followed.

Again my throat constricted. If one single obscenity hit the air, Aarons and I would be standing in the unemployment line tomorrow morning. Sure, some rough language slips by once in a while on the talk

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shows, but that kind of slip would end an anchorman's career. In news, image and dignity are everything.

I stared at the camera-three monitor, the one tracking West. He was clutching at his throat and gagging. Then, as I watched in horrified fascination, he staggered over to the weather map and fell against it.

The countdown began: "Three . . . two . . . one."

Red camera lights winked on. Aarons said, "In late local news—"

Off camera, a screech—like chalk scraping down a dry blackboard—erupted from West.

Aarons' mouth opened wide.

Then the director made a mistake in the confusion: he punched up camera three. West, his back to the camera, began to fall, clawed at the wall for a hold, and then pulled the weather map down on top of him with a loud thump.

Aarons' mouth shut.

"Fade to black," I shouted.

The director rolled a stand-by commercial.

I charged through the control-booth door and onto the news set. Rasping noises were coming from under the map.

"You stay where you are," I yelled at Aarons and the cameramen. I ran to the map. "Give me a hand," I called to Pop Jensen, our propman, but I had West uncovered before the old man's 75-year-old legs could respond. With the help of one of the lighting technicians and with Pop Jensen supervising I dragged West off the set.

After one look at the weatherman's face I sent the old man to call a doctor and an ambulance.

Aarons gaped at the stricken weatherman, who had now begun to froth at the mouth.

"Al," I said, "right after the commercial say something about West being taken ill, and then just go right on with the news like nothing happened. Okay?"

The anchorman made a face and nodded.

It was 6:45, three-quarters of the way through the Six O'Clock News.

Aarons went back on the air with his usual smile. Only his eyes seemed dulled. "We hope to have Ev West back with us tomorrow," he said. "But right now we're sorry to report he's under the weather." Aarons dissolved his smile and went on with the news.

By the time they rolled Ev West out on a stretcher he looked bad. His skin was a funny blue color and his lips were almost black. I was sure he'd had a heart attack.

Back in the newsroom after

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the show I was cross-examined by our news director, Bud Murch. I grunted mostly because by that time I was furious. Even though it hadn't been West's fault, I still resented his sudden illness. I felt as if eight hours of hard work had gone down the drain.

Aarons was steaming, too, but for another reason. "West made me look like a fool out there today," he growled at Murch.

With those two squaring off I stood a little to one side to referee.

The news director said, "True, but then that wouldn't be hard."

I gave up my short-lived noncombatant status and said, "The poor guy has a heart attack or something and all everybody worries about is how it looked on camera." Sticking up for West sort of eased my conscience.

"Do you really think it was a heart attack?" Aarons couldn't keep the eager expectation from his voice.

"Somebody probably poisoned him," Murch said. The newsroom went wild with laughter, then the news director held up a hand for silence. "Actually, he probably got sick from lack of food."

Aarons puffed his cheeks in an imitation of West's pudgy face. "That'll be the day," he said.

"Hey, I'm not kidding," Murch said. "I put him on a diet last week. His jowls were starting to show on the tube, so I ordered him to lose ten pounds."

Aarons puffed his cheeks again. "Why didn't you just cut off his head?"

I remembered some saccharin tablets spilling from West's pocket as they loaded him on the stretcher and the remains of the saccharin being crunched underfoot as the attendants wheeled him away.

Everybody else laughed at Aarons' joke. But that's the way it is in the news business. Either you laugh at everything or you go into a decline because your life is nothing but sixteen-millimeter film of death, pollution, and taxes.

Switching to a sly smile Aarons asked, "Who's doing the weather on the Eleven O'Clock News?"

"Who else?" Murch replied. "Cindy Simpson."

The anchorman's eyes flared.

Murch winked at me. Cindy Simpson was Channel Three's recent concession to Women's Lib, a weekend weather girl.

On a number of occasions at the Office Bar, the unofficial Channel Three rendezvous, I'd heard Aarons' loud-mouthed

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promises to help Cindy with her career. I could guess what he wanted. On the Tod Hicks scale of ten she was physically an eight, maybe even a nine.

"She'll bring up the ratings," Aarons said.

"We're already Number One," I reminded him. "And Ev West helped us get there."

"Well, she might get the forecast right," Murch added. "That would be a change."

You had to agree with that. Ev West was known for his "fair and warmer" forecast. It was the one he used whenever the weather bureau seemed wishy-washy. He always insisted that in Southern California "fair and warmer" was the weatherman's best friend.

At that point the entire male population of the newsroom began to discuss Cindy's attributes. I'd heard it all before, so I went home to dinner.

At eleven o'clock the next morning Murch called. "Hicks," he said without preamble, "I've got bad news."

I had a flash, like color news film, of West's distorted blue face.

"Ev West is dead," he said.

For an instant I thought about the ratings. West had become an institution on the Six O'Clock News; his loss could mean disaster.

"He was poisoned," Murch added in an unnaturally quiet voice.

Suddenly I was breathing as though I had spent the night drinking.

"You still there, Hicks?"

"Yeah."

"I want you to come right in. Cops are swarming all over the place."

Thirty minutes later I sat in the straight-backed visitor's chair, facing our news director across his wood-grained formica desk. Behind him huge photos, bigger-than-life images of our news team, glared from the wall: Aarons flanked by West and sportscaster Jeff Douglas.

Murch seemed to be glaring at my ears. It was only an illusion because he had a weak muscle in one eye. The result was a wall-eyed stare which gave the impression he couldn't look you straight in the face.

"Tod," he said, and I tensed at his use of my first name, "the police want to meet everyone connected with last night's Six O'Clock News. I've managed to stall off the meeting until three, so we won't have to pay overtime to the union boys."

"The power of the press," I said, raising my eyebrows.

"I wish it was. But they've been in our hair for the past two hours. Everybody is behind schedule. Today is going to be a

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nightmare. We've haven't even got the film processor warmed up yet, because right now the cops are down there dusting for fingerprints."

"Why the lab?"

"West was poisoned with silver nitrate. They use it to process film."

"I know that," I said, nodding.

"What I can't understand," Murch went on, "is why he didn't taste the stuff in his coffee, or at least notice it. The fuzz tell me it's highly corrosive."

"The darn fool always gulped down his coffee just before airtime. It was a ritual with him because Aarons always sipped his until it was cold. You know West—any way to needle Al."

"A hard way to die." Murch shook his head.

"Do they have any idea who did it?" I asked.

"No," he said, "but I have a more important problem than that right now." He moved his head to one side so he could get a good look at me. "I want to talk it over with you, Tod, so turn over today's show to someone else and let's go to lunch."

My stomach growled expectantly as I briefed my assistant, Ed Reynolds, a 21-year-old eager beaver just out of journalism school. "Ed, the show's all yours today. I've got things to do." His buck teeth showed as he swallowed hard. "Oh, and I want you to call a full staff meeting at two o'clock."

"That's an hour's overtime," he said. "Did Murch authorize it?"

"That's my worry. Just do it," I ordered. I figured Channel Three could afford it. I had a few things I wanted to say to whoever had sabotaged my newscast.

At the Channel Three commissary I watched Murch attack a tall club sandwich, which threatened to drip mayonnaise on him with each bite. "Here's the situation," he said wetly. "Aarons called me first thing this morning. He sees himself now as an important murder witness. He thinks someone ought to interview *him* on the news."

"You can't be serious," I said, pushing my low-calorie salad to one side.

"You know Aarons, so you know I'm not kidding."

"Yes, I suppose I do." I sighed. "But I still say it would look bush-league to have someone interview the anchorman. Tell him to forget it."

"Look, we can't afford to have him depressed, especially since we've lost West."

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"It's your air," I said.

Murch finished his sandwich, wiped his face, and grinned. "Maybe we should let the new weather girl interview him."

"You mean you're giving Cindy Simpson the job on a permanent basis?"

"Yep," Murch said. "She'll be great."

"You know as well as I do that Ev West was just about half of the Six O'Clock News. He was worth at least five rating points." I felt helpless. "We'll lose those, and Cindy will drive away another two."

Murchison cocked his head and eyed me coldly. "Everything changes," he muttered as we left the commissary.

I found Pop Jensen in the lounge, stretched out on a long leather couch. He came out of his nap slowly, yawning cautiously as if afraid he might strain a muscle.

"Dottie," he whispered, blinking at me through watery eyes.

"Pop," I said, "it's me, Tod Hicks."

He shut his eyes and poked at them with stiff fingers.

As soon as he seemed alert I said, "How's life treating you?"

"I ain't about to give it up yet."

It was a ritual greeting between us.

As he sat up, Pop held his hands out in front of his thin body. Arthritis had worked on them until they looked like grotesque garden cultivators.

"Who put out the coffee last night?" I asked.

"I did, like always," Pop said. "Why?"

"I was just wondering," I said.

Pop squinted at me strangely.

"How are the girls treating you?" I asked.

As always he winked. "I can't complain. Heck, it wouldn't do any good anyway."

Pop Jensen was Channel Three's senior propman, still on the job at 75 because of the union setup. The props contract had no retirement clause, and most of the old-timers have been working since the early days of movies. Union membership was treated as personal property and passed on only when members died.

At two o'clock I herded everybody into the roll-away bleachers which replace the news set every Saturday morning during the Channel Three kiddie show. Cameramen, engineers, and lighting technicians were perched along the top row. Lower, Aarons and Cindy sat side by side. Pop Jensen couldn't make it above the first tier.

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I cleared my throat. "Let me have your attention, please."

"Are you playing detective or bigtime producer?" Aarons hooted like a raucous bluejay, his anchorman's voice bouncing around the studio trying to intimidate me.

I knew if I didn't come back at him, and right away, I was lost. "This isn't one of your AA meetings . . . AA." His love of liquid cheer had earned him the nickname AA. "This meeting has been called to find out who sabotaged the Six O'Clock News last night."

"What do you mean?" Aarons exploded.

"I mean I intend to keep everybody here until I find out the truth."

"That's not what I asked." AA sounded subdued.

I told them about the silver nitrate. Most of them knew already.

Aarons kept looking at his watch. "All right, Al, we'll start with you." I knew he was pressed for time. It usually took him two to three hours to get those bloodshot peepers ready for the Six O'Clock News. "Al," I began, "it's no secret around here that you and Ev West weren't exactly buddy-buddies."

"I'm leaving," Aarons said as he stood up.

"The police will be here to continue this meeting at three," I said.

He sat down. "Actually, Ev and I were great friends." He looked around for a laugh but didn't get one.

"I guess you're not exactly unhappy that Cindy will be taking West's place?"

Under the pretext of crossing her legs Cindy slid about a foot away from Aarons.

AA's eyes flared. "Do you know how that clown predicted the weather?" he said. "He read the *Times* in the morning and then called the weather bureau just before showtime."

"How would you do it, Cindy?" I asked.

"Look out the window," she said, and she did get a laugh.

"Hicks, this is a waste of time," AA boomed.

"Why? Are you worried, Al?"

"Baby, when Al Aarons has to resort to poison someone to get himself a new chick"—he glared at Cindy—"then he'll be all through."

"The next time, who knows, Al. The poison may be for you. Still think this is a waste of time?"

AA sucked at his capped teeth; his eyes faded to obscurity. He shook his head.

"Okay, Al, you can go and work on your makeup," I said with what I hoped was a mali-

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cious grin. "But don't forget to be back by three."

I'd expected resistance, but he stepped down out of the bleachers without a word. As he passed by me I asked quietly, "Did you see anyone fooling with the coffee last night, Al?"

He stopped for a moment, said, "No," then hurried out of the studio.

I turned back to Cindy, who'd managed to expose every inch of her good-looking legs. Her long bleached hair swirled around her head. "I've got to rehearse, Tod. No telling how long the police will keep us, and this will be my first time on the Six O'Clock News."

"Okay, we'll talk while you go through it. I'd like everybody else to please stay in the bleachers."

With a coy smile Cindy climbed down, took my arm, and led me over to her special weather map. "You be the camera, Tod, and I'll do the weather for you."

Do the weather was right. Cindy didn't report it; she *did* it.

Her gimmick was a huge see-through plexiglass map of California. She worked behind it, writing backward with a grease pencil, while looking right through the glass into the camera—in this instance, me.

I squirmed as she pressed her torso against the plexiglass. The weather—usually so bland—took on an entirely new dimension.

"I've never enjoyed the highs and lows so much," I said when she finished the run-through.

"Why, thanks," she said. "I didn't think you were one of my fans."

I looked her up and down, took a deep breath, and began. "Cindy, you had the most to gain by getting rid of Ev West."

"Tod, I'll be honest with you. I don't want to be a weather girl the rest of my life. I want my own show."

"What better way of getting discovered," I said, "than on the Six O'Clock News?"

Her blue eyes stared at me from her suntanned face. On camera Cindy Simpson was every man's dream; in person she was hard and aggressive, a female version of Al Aarons.

"Pop Jensen tells me you were on the news set last night just before we went on the air," I said.

She nodded. "Yes. I was watching West to get some pointers for my weekend weather."

I snorted. "Very convenient."

"It's true." Her voice took on a cutting edge.

I changed the subject. "Did you notice who put out the coffee last night?"

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"Sure. It was Pop. He put it on the desk just before the show."

"He just left it there?" I was beginning to feel my investigation was hopeless. Just about everyone at Channel Three could be a suspect. And not one of us really liked Ev West.

"Yes. He just set them down, one for Al, one for Ev, then left them right after he stirred in the sugar."

"He put sugar in both cups?"

Her eyes narrowed. "No," she said finally, "only in one."

"Pop Jensen," I yelled toward the bleachers.

Maybe it was the tone of my voice, but the bleachers and studio emptied out immediately, leaving Pop and me alone.

I sat next to him on the front row. "Pop, why did you do it?"

"I didn't do anything. Dottie knows I didn't, don't you, Dottie?" He turned away from me as if he were talking to someone else.

Then, without another word, Pop creaked to his feet and began to shuffle toward Cindy's map as though his shoes were strapped to skis.

I followed him over to the plexiglass.

"I've got to clean the map before showtime," he said.

Looking at him, I felt helpless. He lived in another world, one I couldn't understand. All propmen are enigmas. How anyone could stand the job I'll never know. Put simply, a propman handles the show props: grease pencils for the weather map, plastic numbers for the sports scores, seat cushions for the anchorman, and sometimes coffee, though that's not specified by union contract. It's eight hours of pay for about one hour of work.

But despite his short hours Pop Jensen looked his age as he sponged off the map.

"Pop," I pleaded, "if you don't tell me it will be someone else asking the questions—the police."

"How did you know it was me?" he asked.

"You stirred something into one of the coffees."

"Sugar?" he said, his questioning eyes pleading.

"Aarons always drinks his coffee black and West was on a diet. He was using nothing but saccharin. So what you stirred in couldn't have been sugar."

"Yeah," Pop sighed. "He would be on a diet. Nothing ever comes out the way it should."

The old man closed his diluted gray eyes. Saliva splashed out through a gap in his teeth and dripped onto his chin. "He was a terrible weatherman,"

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Pop said. "He never knew when it was going to rain."

"Pop, there's nothing really to forecast in Southern California. A weatherman can predict sunshine every day and be right over ninety percent of the time."

"That's just what he did," Pop said, "even when it was going to rain. He killed my wife—but I didn't mean to kill him. It said poison on the bottle, but I just thought it would burn his mouth and make him sick, maybe so he could never talk again. That's what he deserved."

"How did he kill your wife?" I asked gently.

"She used to idolize him. She listened to him every night. I remember telling her, 'Dot, it looks like rain.' But she wouldn't listen because West had said it was going to be fair and warmer. She got caught out in it—the rain, I mean." Pop's watery eyes took on a hard glint; he was breathing like a man on the verge of a heart attack.

"Are you all right?"

He didn't hear my question. "She was soaked to the skin." Without blinking he looked up into the studio lights. Hatred had erased age from his face. "My wife caught pneumonia and died because of that rain."

"But, Pop, how did you know about the silver nitrate?"

"Just because I'm a propman you think I'm stupid."

I shook my head to deny it, but he saw through me.

"Besides, I've known about that ever since I worked in the movies." Pop smiled.

I tried to smile, but couldn't make it.

"I'm sorry I killed him. He should have lived to suffer like me." Pop's neck creaked as his head bobbed from side to side. "Dottie," he cried. Tears ran down the dry wrinkled face. He began to sob and continued until he was gasping for breath.

I was sorry I had called the meeting, sorry I hadn't left it to the police.

That night, as the red camera lights blinked on for the Six O'Clock News, Al Aarons actually had real tears when he reported the death of Ev West.

As I sat behind the cameras in Pop's chair, I watched unhappily as the news went off without a hitch. My assistant, Ed Reynolds, was now a rival. On the way back to the newsroom Aarons patted him on the back and nodded significantly in my direction.

While the staff gathered around the production desk to talk about Pop Jensen, Aarons read his fan mail to Cindy Simpson.

I felt almost as sorry for

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myself as I did for Pop. "What can they do to a seventy-five-year-old man?" I asked Murch.

The news director shrugged and went back into his office.

"Nothing, I hope," I called after his retreating figure.

But I was wrong.

Everybody said Pop was lucky when they didn't try him for murder, but the insanity plea was just like a death sentence. I could see that when they led him from the courtroom. There was nothing left in his eyes. Everything had been burned away when he killed Ev.

Pop didn't live long enough to know it, but he killed the Six O'Clock News, too. In three months it slipped into second place, down over five rating points.

There's no justice in that either. Cindy's forecasts are much more accurate than Ev West's ever were, but a pretty girl on the news creates a credibility gap. People don't take her seriously. And for her sake, maybe that's just as well—at least, on TV.

"Q"

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God helps them that help themselves.
—Benjamin Franklin, POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK

THE GOOD LORD WILL PROVIDE

by LAWRENCE TREAT and CHARLES M PLOTZ

STATE PENITENTIARY

April 3

Dear Judy,

It's been a whole year now a whole long year without you. But I been a real good prisoner staying out of trouble like a cat stays away from water. They all say I'll get my parole next April, plenty of time to put in a crop. So hang on, you and Uncle Ike. The only thing bothering me is I ain't heard from you in so long. Why? What's happening?

Judy, it's not like I done anything wrong. All I did was drive that car. I didn't know they had guns and itchy fingers, I didn't even know them good. They was just a couple of city fellas hanging around a bar and I got chinning with them and happened to let drop I was the champeen stock car racer of Hadley County. I done a little bragging maybe. I musta told them I could just about drive a car up the side of a wall and down the other side and if they wanted to see how good I was, why come on out and look. Which they did.

Maybe I was a little stupid but when they allowed they'd pay me right then and there to take them to the bank next day and then on out to the back hills where there was no roads, which they said they wanted to do just for the hell of it—well all I did was ask how much. And when they told me I plumb near keeled over. Because it was almost as much as we needed for that mortgage payment. I figured money was money and if they was taking a lot of it out of the bank, why wouldn't they be generous? What I didn't know was they didn't have no account there.

So I reckon I was real stupid. But stupid or not I sure was lucky because if I'd stayed with that pair much longer I'da got killed

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too. But they paid me to get them out of town and up into the hills and after I done that I took off and come straight back to you.

When Ike heard the news on the radio he knowed right off it was me at the wheel of the car. Nobody else could have outdrove and outsmarted the cops and I bet I could have got clear off to Mexico or maybe China if I'da wanted to. And if the airplanes hadn't spotted me like they did that pair. But I done what I was paid for, so I come back where I belonged. And if they took fifty thousand like the papers said or a million I wouldn't know. I was waiting out in the car and all the money I ever seen was what I give you. And like I said, I got it the day before and it wasn't stolen from the bank. Not that bank anyhow.

The sheriff kept asking me where the stolen money was. After all the two bank robbers was dead with no trace of the money and all the sheriff had was me. Just a poor dumb farmer with a knack for handling a car.

But I don't want to worry you with all this. I'm real lonesome for you like I said. So when are you coming up here to visit me? And how are you and how's Ike and the farm?

Your loving husband
Walt

R.F.D. 2, Hadley

April 10

Dear Walt,

I got your letter and the reason I ain't come to see you is that I just don't have the money for the trip. Besides I got to do all the chores now. Uncle Ike's down with the rhumatiz again and Doc Saunders says he won't be up and around until the warm spring weather sets in and that's not liable to happen until May. And when Ike's feeling puny he wants me around all the time and all he does is complain and tell me everybody's out to take the skin off me. He even tried to chase George off the place when George come around in his new car to ask me out for a ride. And I sure needed to get away from the farm for awhile.

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George was real nice to me too. He wanted to know how I was getting along without you and if I missed you much. Well I said it was kind of lonesome, there was things a girl needed sometimes and who was around except Ike? Seems George got my meaning wrong but I straightened him out real good. Afterwards I told him right out that we was liable to lose the farm unless we got that mortgage installment paid and how could I pay it until I got a crop in? And I said that what with George getting promoted to be vice president of the bank he could maybe do something. He said he'd see what he could manage and that was about as far as we got. Anyhow it was nice getting away from Ike for awhile, specially when George took me to dinner at that new place in town.

Walt, I wish you was a banker too.

Your loving wife
Judy

STATE PENITENTIARY

April 15

Dear Judy,

I know it's hard on you and with Ike to take care of it's even worse. He's tetchy enough when he feels good but when he's got the aches he's enough to try the patience of a saint. But the good Lord will provide, Judy, and I know what I'm saying.

About George and the bank holding off—you want to get it writ down. So next time you see him you want to ask him about Ruthie Watkins which I found out about from a guy up here named Ernie Taylor. Ernie, his business is selling letters. And like he says, if I got a cow or a bushel of wheat I can sell them, can't I? So why can't he sell letters?

Ernie and me get along fine because the both of us we're innocent men and we shouldn't ought to be here. But as long as we are we talk about things and Ernie happened to mention some letters he got hold of which George writ to this Ruthie Watkins. So maybe you better mention them to George next time you see him.

Your loving husband
Walt

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R.F.D. 2, Hadley

April 22

Dear Walt,

George took me out to dinner again and we talked about a lot of things. And like you told me to I just happened to mention Ruthie Watkins and then I said about the mortgage and how it ought to be writ down. And the very next day I got a letter from the bank promising to hold off until autumn but I don't know what good it's going to do. Because next time I was out with George, Ike got hold of some of that white mule stuff and after that he got the idea he ought to go riding in the tractor. Which he did, as far as that big ditch on the west side. Ike didn't get hurt bad, just a bruise or two that he's relaxing from, but you ought to see what's left of that tractor. So how do I make that mortgage payment in the fall with no crop coming in? And if I don't pay up we got no farm.

I'm tired, Walt. I'm plumb tired and just about at the end of my tether. You said the good Lord will provide—but how? How?

Your loving wife
Judy

STATE PENITENTIARY

April 28

Dear Judy,

You got to be patient like I said and if you're real patient the Lord *will* provide. Because He come to me in a dream and He said that there was something buried in the south field that would take care of us. So you tell Ike to get over that rhumatiz of his. Tell him I only got a year to go and then I'm going to dig up that something in the south field and after that everything's going to be all right.

Your loving husband
Walt

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R.F.D. 2, Hadley

May 4

Dear Walt,

I don't know just how to tell you this but I guess I'll just set it down the way it happened.

You know how Ike hates the law ever since they come around and took you away. So when the sheriff and six deputies showed up the day before yesterday Ike tried to chase them away. He got up out of bed and ran all over the place looking for his shotgun, only I had it hid. Then he yelled at them and called them all kinds of names and they finally grabbed him and tied him up for a spell, so he never did see what they done. He's spry again, all that running after the deputies loosened him up and now he's as good as ever. But I don't rightly know what the sheriff come for and you'll never tumble to what those deputies of his done.

Walt, they went down to that south field and the six of them spent the whole day digging and then they come back the next day and kept on until they dug up just about every inch of that field. And I never did see any six men look so tired and they sure was mad. I asked them lots of questions and one of them—I think he come all the way down from the prison—he allowed as how all your mail gets read. Walter, what did he say that for?

Your loving wife
Judy

STATE PENITENTIARY

May 7

Dear Judy,

Now plant.

Your loving husband
Walt

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a *NEW* Dr. SAM: Johnson story by LILLIAN de la TORRE

To quote from the author's letter, the newest Dr. Sam: Johnson story "deals with the vicissitudes of a bronze Venus dug up in the early excavations of Pompeii (c. 1765).

"The Society of the Virtuosi is modeled—with a difference—on the famous Society of the Dilettanti, still going strong, which over more than two centuries has done so much for the appreciation of classical antiquities among the English. It was Horace Walpole who uttered the stricture upon them in their early days with which my story opens.

"I have described their regalia from the records . . ." And indeed Lillian de la Torre has done so—a veritable fashion show of the period! But even more fascinating are "the detections of Dr. Johnson"—as shrewd and penetrating as any in the criminological career of that great "lexicographer literary dictator, and stern moralist."

Once again, happy reading!

THE VIRTUOSI VENUS

(as told by James Boswell, London, May, 1778)

by LILLIAN de la TORRE

The Society of the Virtuosi has been called "a club for which the nominal qualification is having been in Italy, but the real one being drunk."

This stricture, I own, is severe. The members, having been to Italy, had some pretensions to taste in the arts of antiquity, three-bottle men tho' they might be. Yet among such a gathering, what business had Dr. Sam: Johnson?

For on that evening in May, 1778, we were making our way towards the Crown Tavern, intent on foregathering with that very

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society of virtuosi. As we passed St. Dunstan's, I glanced at my learned friend. Lexicographer, literary dictator, stern moralist, yet to consort with this famed assembly of rakes he was putting his best foot forward.

His tall, burly form was arrayed in well-brushed claret-coloured broadcloth, he had a snowy cravat to his neck, silver buckles to his square-toed shoes, and even a ring to his finger, an adornment which made me stare, never having seen the like before. Under his uncompromising brown scratch-wig, his strong-cut countenance wore an expression of placid complaisance.

Encouraged by the complaisance, I ventured to rally him on the ring.

"What, sir, hath the little blind god cleft your heart at last? Do you wear a lover's token?"

"Perhaps, sir, it might once have been; but alas, 'tis too late now."

Thus slightly did he refer to a lady at Lichfield whom he had long honoured with his regard. I acquiesced in his reticence, and said no more, but fingered my lace ruffles. In my peach-coloured brocade, with a large black taffety bag to my powdered wig, setting off my swarthy visage, I lagged no whit behind my learned friend in honouring with my attire the meeting of the Virtuosi.

Our first port of call was hard by Cavendish Square, for there dwelt our friend Joseph Nollekens, the sculptor, who had recently modelled a fine head of Dr. Johnson. He it was who was to present us at the monthly dinner of the Virtuosi for the express purpose of making us behold a most curious and rare specimen of the art of long ago: the Virtuosi Venus.

We found the noted sculptor in his work-yard, surrounded with the debris and paraphernalia of his calling—armatures for modelling in clay, vessels for casting in bronze, and blocks of stone to be worked. Two smock-clad journeymen with broom and clout were setting things to rights at the hearth.

In contrast, their master was a resplendent sight. In person he was short of stature, which he mended with a strut, and had fine eyes, a hawk nose, a short neck and a heavy chin. For the evening's festivities he had tricked himself out in his suit of Papal purple, silk stockings with broad blue and white stripes, and lace ruffles and frill, all which he had brought with him from Italy.

"What, sir, you are rich and splendid!" I remarked admiringly.

"My Italian gauds," he smirked complacently, "and not a

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penny for the customs neither Did I tell you how I brought the laces unsuspected past customs?"

"Aye, sir, you did, frequently," replied my moral friend severely. "A most reprehensible act, sir, and an ill example to your journeymen here, and I desire to hear no more on't."

I glanced at the journeymen, who were looking elaborately uninterested. One was a powerful youth with tawny eyebrows. T'other was trim and swart. At him I looked again.

"What, Giacomo!" I exclaimed. "My good friend, did not we meet in the insurgent camp at Corsica these many years gone?"

"*Si, signore*, so we did!" shouted the Italian. His English was always shouted, I remembered, and adorned with a superfluity of terminal particles.

"*Si, signore!* My generale, he bringa me to England"—(hereafter I leave the shout and the scattering particles to be imagined)—"he recommend me to my trade of a statuary. *Viva la liberta!*"

"Liberty forever!" echoed the sandy youth with a twang.

Dr. Johnson turned on him.

"An American?"

"Aye, sir, and proud on't!"

"Then, fellow, spare me your cant about liberty!" growled the sturdy monarchist, who was still smarting from his losing encounter with that frantick rebel, the American spy, Patience Wright. "What have the drivers of slaves to do with liberty?"

"Taxation without representation is tyranny," muttered the American, fortunately too low for my friend's somewhat obtuse ear.

"Enough o' that, Malachy, Giacomo!" said Nollekens hastily. "This way, gentlemen."

He led us within, and there in the work-room we found my Lord Maytland, come to carry us to the Virtuosi in his coach. Though he was their leading spirit, his raking days were past. The wealthy Earl was garbed in quiet splendour, powdered wig with a modish high foretop, mulberry brocade, a froth of Venetian point, a brightness of gold braid. His pale regular features wore a look of supercilious composure.

Exchanging civilities, we lingered in the atelier a moment to admire the work of our friend Nollekens. About the spacious work-room stood his masterpieces in bronze and stone and plaster: Venus with Cupid, a plaster replica of his famous head of Laurence Sterne the novelist, and on a pedestal his newest

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achievement, a busto of Dr. Johnson cast in plaster. My friend was depicted in Roman fashion, with a toga draped about impossibly wide shoulders, and a thatch of hair on the head, cropped in the mode of ancient Rome, which Dr. Johnson with his sparse hirsute equipment pretended to look on with disdain. Secretly, I think, he was pleased.

"What, two heads?" I exclaimed, spying a second plaster replica of my friend on the work-bench.

"Two heads are better than one," smiled Nollekens, "most especially such a head as Dr. Johnson's."

"I have bespoke the second busto," said Dr. Johnson, "for a lady at Lichfield—"

My eye went to the ring with its dull blue stone, but I prudently said nothing.

"And it shall ride with me when I make thither on Saturday next."

"Well, well, 'tis ready," said Nollekens, "and you shall have it at your door betimes to-morrow."

Chatting of matters artistic, we mounted the crest coach of Lord Maytland, and soon drew up before the tavern called the Crown—I should say, previously called the Crown, for the old timbered front glittered with a new sign, a Golden Venus reclining in a silver cockle-shell.

"So puffed up is honest landlord Blodgett to have become titular host to the Virtuosi," smiled the Earl, "that he must advertize the world of it with our Venus for a sign."

"And is your Venus in truth golden, my Lord?" I enquired.

"She is now, sir," replied Maytland wryly, "for in my absence abroad the young Duke of Duncannon was Keeper of the Venus in my room, more for his rank and wealth than for his virtuosity, I fear; and seeing traces of gilding upon her, he takes the notion, inspired perhaps by the new tavern sign, to gild her all over."

"What stupidity!" cried Nollekens.

"Sir," replied Maytland acidly, "in England, 'tis the hereditary right of a Duke to be as stupid as he pleases. I only marvel why such a fellow had any desire to supply my place as temporary Keeper."

With a shrug, Lord Maytland conducted us within, and led us to the private room where the Virtuosi feasted monthly, and kept their treasures the year through.

'Twas a spacious oak-panelled chamber, lighted by a large

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sparkling chandelier in which many candles glowed. Around the walls on brackets stood casts in plaster of the most famous antique heads. A carven press stood open, affording glimpses of gaudy regalia, as the officers of the Society robed themselves. An elaborately adorned cupboard on the wall was still closed and double locked.

In the center of the room, a long table was set for upwards of thirty feasters. Around it the members were milling in clusters, a sight full of colour, for the younger maccaronis among them had got themselves up in the uniform of the Society, a jewel-hued caftan with myriad small buttons, a voluminous rich brocaded dolman, and a huge turban swathing a quilted crimson tarboosh, *a la Turque*.

Lord Maytland, presenting us, was naming over our hosts, so rapidly I only caught a name and a face here and there.

"His Grace the Duke of Duncannon—"

A dissipated face, a vinous flush, a look of stubborn stupidity to the manor born.

"Sir Brutus O'Banion—"

An expression of derisive risibility quirking a long Irish upper lip.

"Sir Francis Flashwood—"

The notorious Hell-fire Francis, he who conjured up the Devil at Westcombe! But that story is yet to be told.

"Signor Angelo Angelini, the Italian sculptor, and my very good friend—"

A handsome dark face, liquid black eyes, an insinuating smile.

" 'Tis he," cried Maytland with *enthusiasm*, "who can tell you of the Virtuosi Venus, for he stood by my side at Pompeii as she came out of the earth."

The Italian sculptor opened his mouth to take up the tale, but the Earl was in full cry:

"Figure to yourself sister cities in the Campania, Pompeii and Herculaneum, rich in the treasures of art, whelmed in a day by the eruption of Vesuvius in the year 79, nigh on seventeen centuries ago—lying buried since, and only now yielding up their treasures to man's sight!"

"And what treasures!" I cried. "When I was at Naples in the '65, 'twas my privilege to see them at the Portici Palace—the marble statues, the bronzes great and small, brought up from buried Herculaneum as from a mine! Nay, to descend under

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ground and walk the tunnels, viewing by flickering torch light columns and wall paintings in the houses of Romans long dead,—I assure you, sir, it gave me in overflowing measure those sentiments proper to a man of sensibility!"

"Were not the tunnels noxious," observed Maytland, "with damps and exhalations?"

"They were so, sir, and I turned with relief to view the *scavi* at Pompeii, which they were then beginning to open to the air."

"Did you walk in the Street of the Tombs, by the Herculaneum Gate?" asked Maytland.

"Yes, sir, and mused upon those entombed there so long ago, and those who died on that fatal day and lay seventeen centuries without sepulture."

"A solemn *memento mori*," remarked my philosophical friend.

"Then know, sir," pursued the Earl, "that from that very trenching by the Herculaneum Gate emerged the Virtuosi Venus. 'Twas my good fortune to be on the spot, sir, and I acquired her, tho' at a dear rate, without ado."

Dramatically he pictured the scene.

"The diggers were very banditti, for half were convicts, with fierce bristling mustachios, scowling brows, a cacophony of patois. On the edge of the trench behold me with my guide, Signor Angelini. Below us a single bandit is digging out a wayside shrine of the dead. Standing pilasters show him where it lies. The shovel strikes metal! We leap to his side! Out of the dust emerges—the Virtuosi Venus!"

"I was fortunate, sirs, in my guide." Angelini bowed. "He recognized at once what we had. As you shall see, this Venus is doubly precious in that she bears, sentimentally inscribed on the soles of her sandals, the name of her maker, and the date, the year 51. Well, sirs, my good Angelini knew at once what a treasure the bandit digger had unearthed—he spoke the fellow's patois—and in short, gentlemen, so well did he negotiate, that the bandit had money, and I had the Venus, and she never left my hands till I brought her to England and presented her to the Virtuosi."

"Bribing the fellow must have cost you a pretty penny," said Nollekens, whose propensity to squeeze the farthing is well known.

"*Si, signore*, that is so," assented Angelini. He spoke English clearly enough, with a suaver tone than Giacomo, but much the same tripping gallop of syllables, which I leave to be imagined.

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"But," he added, "she was worth every zecchin, as the connoisseurs at Rome assured us."

"Speaking of Rome," said Nollekens quickly, "d'ye know how I fetched these stockings from Rome without paying tribute at customs?"

"Bejasers, a bit of useful knowledge, how?" exclaimed O'Banion.

"Come, gentlemen," interposed Maytland, "the Very High Master of Ceremonies summons us to table."

In crimson taffety robe crossed with gold-embroidered baldrick, the Very High Master with a good deal of hocus-pocus finally got us all into our places. The Sovereign in his robes and gold-braided Hussar cap took the chair, balanced at the foot by the Lord Keeper of the Venus, our friend Maytland, hastily hustled into his scarlet Roman toga. We three, his guests, with his friend Angelini, were seated on his either side.

Of the feast what shall I say? There was turtle. There were "oysters and lobsters to cure melancholy," for as the poet says, "Dame Venus, love's lady, was born of the sea." There was Dr. Johnson's favourite comestible, a rich veal pye with plums and sugar. Of all Dr. Johnson partook with gusto.

When the walnuts and wine had been enjoyed, and the company was in a glow, the ritual of the Virtuosi Venus commenced. With ceremony two ornate keys were produced. Bustling Blodgett wore one on a thong around his neck. The Keeper, Lord Maytland, produced the other from his waistcoat pocket. Together they advanced to the carven wall cabinet; each in turn applied his key; the door swung wide; and Lord Maytland set before the Sovereign a richly laced pouch of royal purple velvet. With it unopened before him, the Sovereign charged his glass with rosy claret, and rose for the first toast.

"Gentlemen, I give you—the Virtuosi Venus!"

"The Virtuosi Venus!"

"And all her handmaidens!" added an irreverent young buck as we drank the toast standing.

Glasses emptied. We resumed our places. The Sovereign loosed the string of the velvet pouch and produced the Virtuosi talisman.

'Twas a reclining Venus, undraped, most exquisitely formed, not more than twelve inches long from parted tresses to sandalled toe-tips. So much was to be seen at a glance. Then the treasure began to go from hand to hand along the table, in a ritual which,

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the Virtuosi believed, brought luck in the lists of the goddess. One after one, the young elegants stroked the small rounded form as it passed along, the Duke muttering a wish with a half sneer, O'Banion with a hasty and careless flip of the finger, Flashwood caressing the small rounded rump and parts even more privy with a leer.

With reverence little Nollekens, the sculptor, received into his hands this rare relique of antient times. He bore it to the lighted torch beside the outer door, where he turned it about in the blaze to admire it from all angles.

"Make haste, sir, 'tis my turn," I cried eagerly, and the sculptor, returning to the table, yielded it to my hand.

My first wish was to read the name of the maker, inscribed on the goddess's sandal. With some difficulty I made out the letters: A-D-L-I.

"Of Adlus—the work of Adlus," I construed. "O brave Adlus!"

"Come, Mr. Boswell," Angelini hurried me, "the Venus stands."

Thus nudged, I passed my fingers over the gilded surface as seemed good, silently calling upon the goddess to confirm my prowess in a certain *affaire* then pending. My Lord Maytland, slightly touching in his turn, passed her along into the hands of Dr. Johnson.

"You young bloods may wish upon love's altar," my friend observed genially, "but I shall honour the nobler part (passing his finger over the head). So old and rare a goddess will sure—but what is this!"

He brought the figure close to his near-sighted eyes, peering intently, and repeated the gesture, bisecting the talisman round about with a questioning finger. He looked soberly at Lord Maytland.

"Alas, my Lord," he said, "I fear the Virtuosi have been cheated. This figure is not old. Nay, it is a clumsy forgery."

"What, sir, impossible! I myself saw her taken from the earth at Pompeii!"

"And I too, I saw it," protested Angelini.

Dr. Johnson shook his head.

"There are two ways," he said, "to make a casting in bronze, an old way and a new way; and this thing was made the new way."

"Make that good, sir," said my Lord stiffly. Caught by his earnestness, the company stilled and stared.

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I did not doubt that my learned friend could meet the challenge. His lively curiosity ranged wide, from chymical experimentation to baking of clay, and of his hours spent sitting to Nollekens he had doubtless made good use.

"Know then, sir," said Dr. Johnson, "that the antient way of casting started with a mold made over a model of wax. Before the in-pouring of the molten metal, by the application of heat the wax melted, flowed away, and was lost. Thus an antient bronze is of one surface, without seam.

"A new casting is made otherwise. From the clay model is made a plaster matrix, taken away in pieces, and reassembled. The metal casting that finally emerges bears rough lines where the sections of the matrix joined. These must be filed away."

"So far I am with you, Dr. Johnson," said Lord Maytland, "for in the work-room of Angelini I myself have turned my hand to the casting of bronze in the manner you describe."

"Now on this object," pursued Dr. Johnson, indicating the Venus, "the filing has been hasty and careless, and with your fingers you may feel where the line of joining runs."

He tendered the figure to Lord Maytland, who took it with a frown. He ran his hand over it, not slightly this time but attentively, and the frown deepened.

"You are right, Dr. Johnson! I know my Venus. Here, at the ear, she had a ringlet, where this one shows the ridge of the cast. This object is not the Virtuosi Venus!"

Over the hubbub that arose his voice rang out:

"Sit still! Dr. Johnson shall sift the matter, and we'll have her again before we leave this place!"

Of course the first on the carpet was Tom Blodgett, the landlord. He swore his Davy oath that he had unlocked the carven chest only at the behest of the Keeper, and seen the Virtuosi Venus safely into his hands, and out of them again at locking-up time.

"Then we must exquire at the Keeper. My Lord Maytland?"

"My key has been safe in my hands since the Virtuosi met in April, when, resuming my office, I received it from the Duke of Duncannon."

"My Lord Duke?"

"Must I answer this fellow?"

"I advise it," said Maytland coldly, and a kind of general growl seconded him.

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"Then ask," said the young Duke sulkily.

"You received the Keeper's key, your Grace, when my Lord Maytland left England?"

"Yes, in October."

"And yielded it up a month ago?"

"He said so."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime I turned the key with honest Tom at the feasts."

"And not otherwise?"

"No."

"Think again, my Lord Duke. The Venus was gilded some time in your incumbency."

"What then?"

"She was not gilded inside her chest."

"So I took her home. And brought her back."

"Think, your Grace, she you brought back was a fraud. *Where is the real Venus?*"

A dead silence was broken by Sir Brutus O'Banion's chuckle.

"What d'ye say to *that*, alanna?" he grinned.

The young Duke flicked his eyes about, and found no support anywhere. He shrugged.

"The real Venus," he said slowly, "is safe in my hands, and you may have her when you please. Here—read this."

From his waistcoat pocket he produced a small black book.

"My betting book," he muttered.

He extended an opened page to his neighbour, who read:

"Duncannon lays O'Banion 2 hundred Pieces (viz. Guiney Gold) that he will steal y^{e} Virtuosi Venus and hold her a year w^{out} Detection; After w^{ch} She shall be returned & y^{e} Wager paid: But if she be recover'd earlier by his O'Banion's Word or Deed, he shall be deem'd to have lost y^{e} Wager. Sept.^{r} y^{e} 8, 1777."

" 'Tis you have lost the wager," drawled O'Banion. "So pay up, cully!"

"He may pay up in the morning," said Maytland sternly, "but he'll produce the Venus instanter!"

To receive it, a deputation proceeded with the Duke to his lodging hard by. The Sovereign, Lord Maytland, Angelini as

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official sculptor to the Society, Dr. Johnson and party, made up the number. Needless to say, I was agog to behold the Ducal splendour of the young nobleman's abode, but it was not to be. We commoners cooled our heels in the fellow's "Jerusalem chamber" while our titled companion went abovestairs to fetch the Venus.

"Why, this was easy!" I congratulated my *detector* friend as the Duke appeared with the gilded Venus. "Now we may wish, and win!"

"I first," said Dr. Johnson, taking the effigy and again passing his hand around it. His brows went up.

"Not yet," he said softly. "We are still diddled. This figure is not the Virtuosi Venus!"

Nor was it: a rough ridge made that plain. The Duke rapped out an oath.

"Angelini?"

The Italian shrugged.

"As you know, my Lord Duke, 'twas at your order I caused a copy to be cast—"

"You did so!" exclaimed Lord Maytland. "You shall regret this, Angelo."

"Why so, my Lord?" demanded the Italian boldly. "Am I not to obey the Keeper of the Venus? I sent him back the Venus with the copy, and I know no more."

Angelini had nothing more to contribute. We were come to a full stop for that time. The hour was late. In Lord Maytland's coach we departed for our respective dwellings.

As we set down Nollekens, a complication ensued. Dr. Johnson, having coach room at his disposal, determined then and there to carry off his head for his lady at Lichfield. Nor would he accept the new busto made expressly for him, but must needs have Nollekens' own copy from its pedestal, deeming it somehow handsomer, perhaps by its eminence thereon.

The journeymen were summoned, from where they sat drinking drams by the kitchen fire, unwillingly to pad the busto in straw and bag it in sacking. Malachy lugged it out and shoved it onto the coach seat in the place of Nollekens, and off we rolled.

Barely had we circumtraversed the square, when we ran afoul of a single footpad. He wore a smock like a carter's, a large flapped hat, and a black neckerchief over his nose, and he levelled a long pistol in menacing silence. At the man's gesture we descended, I in

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haste with my hands in the air, Lord Maytland contemptuously at his leisure, Dr. Johnson last, scowling. The coachman had his hands full with the prancing horses.

Another gesture of the firearm commanded us to deliver. It went wrong, for while in a blink the weapon was out of line, quick as a snake striking, the resolute Dr. Sam: Johnson had knocked aside the barrel, which roared harmless in the air, and the footpad took to his heels.

We arrived at Bolt Court without further incident, and soon the busto in its packing had reached the first stage of its journey to Lichfield by being set down in the back garden, the coachman with Dr. Johnson's servant, black Frank, carrying the burden,

That done, we repaired within to take tea with Miss Williams, the blind poetess, Dr. Johnson's honoured inmate; a ceremony never to be neglected no matter how late he returned from his ramblings.

The sightless lady's ears were sharper than ours.

"Hist!" she cried suddenly. "There's someone in the garden!"

Sure enough, from the window we saw a pale shape moving like a ghost.

"Frank! The poker!" roared Dr. Johnson.

But when we issued forth in a body, the intruder was gone, darkly as he had come, and nothing had been touched.

"What a to-do have we had to-night!" grumbled Dr. Johnson. "In Heaven's name let us seek repose!"

For what was left of the night, I was accommodated in the spare chamber, and Frank was assigned to sentry-go in the garden, and so the darkness passed without further alarums.

In the morning all was quiet, and bidding Frank keep a sharp eye, we went forth about our business. Our first business was in Bow Street. There we found neither the famous "Blind Beak," Sir John Fielding, nor our very particular friend, his second in command, Saunders Welch; but at our instance their men set forth with us to search the work-room of Signor Angelini.

The sculptor, protesting his innocence, was eager to assist, but saving the mold from which the false Venuses were cast, nothing of any consequence was brought to light. The worker who cast them was not to be questioned, he having upon some fancied dissatisfaction taken French leave a while before.

Our next stop was the atelier of our friend Nollekens, to seek his help in our researches. The work-yard was empty of

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journeymen, but we found Nollekens within, dusting the famous busto of Sterne and chuckling over it.

"Did I tell you, Mr. Boswell," he greeted me, "how I brought my Roman gauds past customs?"

"No! How?" I cried hastily over Dr. Johnson's disapproving grunt.

"Stuffed inside this very head!" exclaimed the penny-pinching sculptor triumphantly, "for 'tis empty inside, like all these casts—"

"And like the heads of novelists," added Johnson. "Let us hear no more of it."

Carrying Nollekens with us, we returned to Bolt Court. There we found Frank at the street door, pursing his thick lips and scratching his woolly head over a scrap of paper.

"From you, Dr. Johnson," he said, "only I think not, for see, 'tis signed 'Saml Johnson,' which I think is not your wont."

"Sharp lad," approved Dr. Johnson, "you are a credit to your schooling. So, what is this?"

He read it out: " 'Pray deliver to y^{e} Barers y^{e} Busto for cartage. Saml Johnson.' Pah, 'tis none of mine. Who brought it?"

"Two carters."

"Pity you let them slip."

"Nor did I, sir, for there stands the cart, and they are in the kitchen. I took it on me, sir, looking for your return, to bid them wait there while I went, as I said, to Miss Williams."

"Well done. Keep them in play ten minutes yet, and then I shall sift them. Meanwhile, pray step this way, gentlemen."

We followed him to the garden, where the busto still stood decked with straw. Swiftly my friend had off the straw, and turned the cast on its side.

"Ah ha!" he cried. On the under side, across the width of the shoulders, instead of the expected orifice, was a thin slab of plaster like the lid of a chest, tightly fitted into place. It took a thin blade to coax it out. Like the head of Sterne, this busto was no longer empty. I stared at a wad of rags stuffed within.

"What, Nollekens, still up to your tricks?" I ejaculated.

From the hollow spread of shoulder Dr. Johnson was easing forth the rags, from which unrolling he brought forth—the Virtuosi Venus.

This one had not been gilded. Her surface was bronze and

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blue-green, only on necklace and armlets and sandals traces of gold glittered.

"Behold the Virtuosi Venus," said Dr. Johnson with satisfaction, "as she came out of the earth."

" 'Tis none of my doing," said Nollekens hastily.

"I think 'tis not, sir," replied Dr. Johnson, "else you had no parted so lightly with the busto she dwelt in. But exactly as I said, you have set a bad example."

"To whom, sir?"

"To the thief of the Venus; and if I mistake not, here he comes."

The carters, herded by Frank, were issuing from the doorway. When they saw Nollekens, they would have turned back, but Frank had slammed and locked the passage door upon them.

"My lads," said Johnson sternly, "you are detected, so come forward and account for yourselves."

The tall one advanced resolutely, pulling off his flapped hat, and the thin one followed suit.

"What, Giacomo, old friend!" I exclaimed at sight of the latter. "What's to do here?"

The fellow rolled his eyes over us. When he saw the Venus in Dr. Johnson's hands, he burst into a stream of Italian imprecations.

"Thievery's to do!" he shouted. "She is not yours! Nor Angelini's, *porco fetente, ladro maledetto!* Nor the English milord's! She belongs to my country, and thither she shall go, if I keep breath in my body!"

"And I'll help you against them all!" cried Malachy stoutly. "*Viva la liberta!*"

All was soon made clear. When my liberty-loving friend Giacomo, bronze-casting for Angelini, received the stolen Venus for copying, his fiery heart filled with *patriotism*, and he perceived his chance to restore her home again to Italy, where he conceived she belonged. He cast, and gilded to cover blemishes, not one copy, but two, one for the Virtuosi, one to diddle the Duke, and kept the original by him.

Slipping away, he had attached himself to Nollekens, until he should have amassed money for his evasion to Italy. In the interim, taking the hint from Nollekens' boasts, he lodged the Venus for safety in the hollow busto of Dr. Johnson in its place of honour on the pedestal. When that busto, against expectation, left

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the house, he had thrice endeavoured to come at it again, in the manner that we knew.

"And I demand her back!" he cried grandly, "for restitution to her rightful owner, for she belongs to my country from of old!"

"Well, my lad, bravely spoke," smiled Dr. Johnson, his long shapely fingers still caressing the small figurine, "and you perhaps should have her, if you spoke true. But this figure I hold belongs to nobody from of old, for like the others she was cast in recent times."

"What!" shouted Giacomo. "Have I wasted my endeavours!"

"I fear so. You are a bronze-caster, you will concur when I show you here, though better trimmed away than on your hasty copies, the same ridge left by a mold. And to further proof, look here."

We stared as he doffed the ring from his finger, and slid the blue-gray stone over the surface of the recovered Venus. To my surprise, it caught and clung, nor did it fall away tho' the figure was inverted.

"What magick is this, sir?"

"No magick, Mr. Boswell, but the simple operation of a natural phaenomenon. Following a very old custom, my ring, sir, is set with a lodestone, which attracts iron, in sentimental allusion to the attraction that binds lovers.

"Now you must know, sirs, that a bronze casting of to-day is made with a core inside the mold, which core is held in position by iron wires. The wire ends pierce the surface, and must be covered by thin plugs of bronze. You can feel the plugs—"

"And this curl at the ear, by which my Lord Maytland knew his Venus, is one of them?"

"No, sir, that lies over the joining, 'tis meer flourish, to cover a blemish, perhaps. But here—and here—and here—you may see, sir, what I can only feel, the plugs that cover wires."

"How can you know what they cover?"

"Why, sir, by the unique property of the lodestone, which will not adhere to bronze, but only to iron. See how she clings at each plug, feeling the pull beneath. Thus she makes plain that under the plugs lie, not bronze, but the iron wires of a recent casting. In a word, Mr. Boswell, we have pursued the Virtuosi Venus from copy to copy, and find the original false at last!"

"But what of these blue-green encrustations, such as result from lying long in earth?" I asked.

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"They are the result of chymical change, sir, and may be produced quickly if the right substances be applied. No, sir, the Virtuosi Venus is a convincing fraud, the work of an artist, but a fraud she is—the cast-marks prove it, and the pull of the lodestone concurs."

"Who then is the fraud-maker?"

"Signor Angelini," announced Frank from the passage door.

"Pat upon his cue," smiled Dr. Johnson. "Your servant, Signor Angelini."

"*Servitore umilissimo*, Dr. Johnson—Mr. Boswell—Mr. Nollekens—(distributing bows)—what, Giacomo, you scoundrel!"

The Corsican veteran said something in Italian, not of the most civil.

"You have found the bronze-caster, Dr. Johnson," observed Angelini, approvingly. "Have you found the Venus? But I see that you have. Bravo, sir, my patron will be pleased to recover this priceless relique of antiquity."

"That's as may be," said Dr. Johnson dryly, "but let us speak plainly, sir. You know, and I know, that this Venus is no relique of antiquity, but the work of a latter-day sculptor. and you, I think, are he."

"How can that be?" countered Angelini coolly, "when I stood by my Lord Maytland as she came out of the earth?"

"Having first put her in there, perhaps? Thus pleasing your patron, and splitting his gold with the scoundrel digger, in the same operation?"

"And the date on the sandal?" I puzzled.

"Ah, the date! That I think may be significant." Dr. Johnson advanced the sandalled extremities close to his near-sighted eyes.

"On the left sandal, I read: A-D-L-I—"

"Brave Adlus, the maker," said I.

"The year 51. Cannot you read Roman numerals?" corrected Angelini contemptuously.

"Yes, sir, I can read Roman numerals," rejoined Dr. Johnson. "The year 51 by what reckoning?"

Angelini stared.

"A.D. 51, *anno Domini*, the year of our Lord 51," said Dr. Johnson. "Thus *you*, sir, are accustomed to reckon. But what pagan maker of heathen idols would reckon the year from Jesus' birth, or indeed have heard of Him at all? No, sir: from the founding of Rome, from the accession of the Emperior, this date

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might pass; from the birth of Christ, never. By the mark of the mold, by the iron wires, by the false date, the fraud is triply detected: admit it."

"I admit nothing," snapped Angelini.

"Spare your denials. Whether you have cast the counterfeit yourself, as I think, or only passed it off on Lord Maytland, the matter is closed. These Virtuosi gentlemen, raking Italy for antiquities, are meer gulls begging to be bilked. No, no, 'tis a pretty little thing, and I felicitate you; and moreover she brings the Virtuosi their amatory successes. Shall we destroy the power of their talisman and reduce their hardihood?"

"Never!" I cried.

"Then let us give them back their Venus unattainted, and let all of us"—eyeing his hearers, Angelini between chagrin and relief, Giacomo still muttering, Malachy grinning, and Nollekens examining the Venus with a professional eye—"let all of us hold our tongues."

Thus the Virtuosi Venus went home, winning us the gratitude of Lord Maytland and the rakes of the Society. Our reward was not gold or fee, which Dr. Johnson resolutely refused to touch; but the two false gilded Venuses, which now stand as mementos in the garden, Dr. Johnson's at Bolt Court, mine at Auchinleck; and moreover, whatever her history, by the powers of the VIRTUOSI VENUS (perhaps) I found my own at apogee when—but that is another story.

"Q"

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MONKEY-FACE

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

An ox-eyed boy, who grabbed my luggage as though a bullwhip cracked behind him, and a wise-eyed bellman took me up to my hotel room in the tiny creaking elevator. The bellman said something in Italian about a piano. I shook my head. Why would I need a piano in Rome? No dancing here for me, not even teaching. Besides, after Mexico, if I never heard music again, good. That is, unless—

Wise-Eyes grinned and pointed to the number on the big key in his hand. It was 315. He pointed to the floor we passed and said, "Thees two piano," and shook his head. He opened the elevator door at the next floor and said, "Thees three piano. Piano ees floor." He winked intimately, wiggled his fingers across the air, shook his head, "No play music. Piano ees floor. Now you spik Italiano."

The ox-eyed boy picked up the luggage, bowed as he circled me, scurried down the bare polished hallway. It was an old hotel, very Italian, very reasonable. But in peak time it must have been elegant and beautiful. Cupids and frescoed Renaissance ladies and gentlemen frolicking under stiff trees; scrolls, ribbons, flowers on the walls; carved doors. Even now,

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despite chipped paint and plaster, it was still elegant, antiqued as though by an artful craftsman.

The bellman opened a cupid-scrolled door and bowed me inside. Ox-eyes scampered in, set down my luggage, bobbed his head, and ran out as though kicked on his way. The bellman unfastened the bolt of the heavy wooden shutters to let in the last of the day's sun, patted the bed, opened drawers, and said with a touch of superiority, "No bat'. Come, plis." He beckoned me to follow.

Down the hall he opened a door. It was obviously the "bat'," with a huge side-spigotted marble tub. He led me back to my room, went to the telephone on the wall, made a play of putting a receiver to his ear, and spoke into the dead phone. "Plis! Bat' plis! Send woman!" he yelled, then turned to me and smiled. "See? Ees easy, signorina. You ask telefono, woman, he come." He bowed, departed.

I went to the open window and looked down to the evening street. The people milling about could have been in Los Angeles, Indianapolis, or Pittsburgh. The only thing Roman seemed to be the street itself, an open square with narrow lanes winding into dark crevices between stone buildings. A person could get lost here, lost in some stony crevice. *Why did you come to Rome, Ugly Face? It's a place where people get lost, not found.*

I unpacked, undressed, put on my robe, and went to the telephone. "Bath, please," I said when the desk responded.

In a few minutes a timid knock came at the door. A large middle-aged woman with black hair and eyes and rosy cheeks smiled pleadingly. "Bat'! Bat'!" she yelled, and made violent scrubbing motions. She turned and fled down the hall to the bathroom. I followed.

As I entered she flung herself on hands and knees before the tub, scrubbed it with dedication. She attacked the bidet, toilet, and finally the floor. This done, she ran to a hall closet, returned with a votary offering of large towels. "Bat'!" she shrieked triumphantly, and vanished.

The long sturdy towel bar caught my eye. A conditioned animal trained to respond to a long-known signal, I took hold of it and began pliés, leg lifts, back bends. After the long flight from New York it felt wonderful. When I was stretched enough, I filled the tub and soaked.

Relax, Ellie. Get lost yourself. Are you crazy, trying to

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find Joe? You want to die or something?

Or something.

So I relaxed, and forgot Guadalajara. For a minute. Then the memory was back, reeling through my mind in jerky shots like a movie filmed by an amateur—Guadalajara's roses and fountains, broad avenues, the warm-natured brown people. Then all of that faded, and only Joe was left. The memory of Joe was heavy upon me, like a ton of lead.

I sank down, down, down, deliberately, into the warm water. It crept past my mouth, into my nostrils. *Joe, can I find you this way?* I sat up abruptly, strangling, coughing.

Only an idiot would have kept a tryst in Rome with a lie. Or an ugly-faced lonely girl.

As I dressed it was past twilight, and predinner crowds were wandering Rome's streets. Laughter rose softly from the pavements below. Even the sound of a guitar—no, it was a mandolin. I ran to the window in bra and pantie girdle to look for the musician. A sharp whistle from across the narrow side-street greeted me. I looked up.

Two men, faces almost indiscernible in the shadows of their unlighted room, were making wide motions, outlining a voluptuous female figure, blowing kisses, motioning. I closed the shutters. Nevertheless, it was cheering. I was an attractive female.

Don't be a dope, Ellie. For those men, female is enough. Who brought up the idea of attractive?

Joe used to.

Used to, Ellie.

I put on a plain dark-brown jersey, sleeveless, its high neck dramatized with an amber choker. It set off my tawny hair and turned my freckles golden. "Monkey-Face," I said to my reflection in the antiqued mirror above the vanity table. Snub nose, broad mouth, high cheekbones.

My Russian great-grandfather had been born and raised on the border of Mongolia. When he came to the New World, he found an Irish girl in New York, which was why I turned out to be a blonde, snub-nosed, freckled Mongol. Daughter of a descendant of the Blue Wolf, if you believe in legends. Better the wolf had left me a bit more of its nose.

Family stories, handed down, told of the Blue Wolf ancestor and fantastic episodes of Mongol bravery and agility. Of how my great-grandfather had danced the violent folk dances even as an old man. "An ugly man," my grandmother, his daughter-in-law, had told

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me. "Until he sang and danced. Then he became handsome as a prince. He could leap across a table, jump high as a man's shoulder, even at seventy. They don't make men like that any more."

I stuck out my tongue at my reflection, and at my long-dead great-grandfather. We ugly ones. What good was a lithe, tight-muscled body that could lift into the air like a coiled spring let free, fall to stage like a leaf, coil and spring again, when a face like that topped it?

"You've inherited your great-grandfather's talent," grandmother had said, "along with his high cheekbones and slanted eyes." As if I didn't know.

"Too bad you can't dance any more, Ugly Puss," I said to me as I picked up my purse and went out to discover Rome. And look for a special face.

Down on the street, involved in it, Rome no longer resembled Los Angeles, Indianapolis, or Pittsburgh. It had a special feeling, not like Guadalajara, yet somehow reminiscent of it. The singing foreign speech, screeching tires of little cars as they darted through narrow streets, put-put of motor scooters, clink of dishes in sidewalk cafés, fragments of music.

I went swinging down the street in rhythm with Rome's sounds, past a tall colonnade carved with history. Yet not fast enough to escape a sharp pinch on my thigh. In one motion I whirled and kicked, and connected with a shin bone. A stocky dark-haired man yelped, grabbed his leg. But even as he did, his free hand tossed a kiss. "*Bella, bella tigrelina!*" he called.

Well. One more animal for my collection. Blue Wolf, *tigrelina*, "*Muy Mona.*" The last meaning *very monkey*, meaning down in Mexico "very cute." The way Joe had called me "*Muy Mona,*" as though he were kissing me, sounded lovelier than "beautiful little tigress" said by a stocky Italian stranger who pinched bottoms.

Joe and I hadn't spoken much Spanish to each other because I knew only a few words. With him it came easy, he said, because his mother was Italian. So he made plain to me what "*Muy Mona*" meant. Very, very cute girl! And I, stumbling over the words, told Joe he was a "*muy macho, hermoso hombre,*" a very masculine, beautiful guy. Joe liked that.

Once I started thinking about Joe, Guadalajara came back with a rush. The Roman piazza I was crossing, avoiding screeching little cars, became

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superimposed by a Mexican plaza filled with the same kind of demonic vehicles. The feeling of having flown backward, across the sea into another land and city, deepened as I passed the *Teatro dell'Opera* and dimly saw the advertisement for an operatic presentation. It was at the *Teatro Degollado* in Guadalajara where Joe and I first met.

On that night the *Teatro Degollado* presented a Chinese puppet show, the puppets large, brilliantly costumed, their movements intricate and exotic. I could feel my muscles flex, tighten, and release along with the movements on stage.

"Great, isn't it?" a masculine voice said beside me.

The theater balcony was packed that night, too many heads to bother picking out separate faces. I hadn't noticed who sat beside me. Now I did. Joe had dark blue eyes, so dark that on that first night in the shadowed theater I thought they were black. And black wavy hair. A lean, taut, yet easy look. A grin.

"Yes," I said. "Really great."

"Marvelous to have talent, isn't it?"

I had a terrific urge to impress him—to tell him he was sitting beside someone fantastically talented. Even though I'd struck a bummer, the talent was still there. A stupid ballet partner had let me slip and injured my back. So now I was stuck with coaching, or running a ballet school. No minor ballet roles for Ellie, please, star or nothing.

"Yes. Really marvelous."

He grinned and winked. "A really terrific conversationalist, aren't you?"

"Really terrific!" I said snappily, and whipped my face away from looking too steadily into those laughing dark eyes.

I certainly wasn't going to admit that I talked that way because I was shy and awkward about talking to men, in personal encounter. Strange, perhaps, but it was a fact despite a professional background of ten years. I was in Mexico for a rest before either taking the coaching job offered in New York City or searching around the States for a likely small city as a ballet-school location. I had decided if I could no longer be a top ballerina I could at least help bring others to the top.

This Mexican trip was really the first vacation I'd had since I began professional work at fifteen. Now I was twenty-five. I had worked hard, had no time out for play or men. Besides, with a snub nose and a big mouth—yes, face it, a monkey

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look, forget the *very cute*, along with the shyness the face brought—there simply weren't any men wanting to be in my life. Only ballet partners. And one had let me fall.

"Joe's the name. And how about a *hamburgesa* after the show?" Joe said at the intermission. "Joe sounds dependable enough, doesn't it? Any girl can tell her mother she'll be absolutely safe with a guy named Joe. Especially when it's stuck in front of Smith. Good old Joe Smith."

"It sounds fictitious. What are you hiding out from?"

"Smart girl," Joe said, smiling lazily. He patted my shoulder. "It's actually Joe Jones, but I was afraid you wouldn't believe that."

"I don't."

"You've got a cute face. Your nose wrinkles when you try to look snooty. Know what they call cute down here in Mexico? *Muy mona.* And you are *muy, muy mona.* Does Mona happen to be your name?"

"Ellie," I said. "Ellie Vlasak."

"Should be Mona. Because you are very, very cute, Ellie Vlasak."

I didn't know then that *mona* meant monkey. And by the time I found out I loved the idea. That is, the way Joe said it. *Cute little Monkey-Face, that's what I'll call you, darling Monkey-Face, with the squinched-up nose and the slim goddess body.*

"Tell you what, Ellie Vlasak, you eat a *hamburgesa* with me and I'll tell you my real name. It's a promise."

Joe's eyes could take on a special look. Intimate and laughing. As though whoever he was talking to had been sharing secrets with him for years and years. When we left the theater we were both laughing, and he was swinging my hand.

Joe Brandon was his name, he said after the hamburger. And a week or so later I saw that name on the door of his apartment. He wanted to see me dance and he had a stereo. Me, I only had a small hotel room. So I went to Joe's apartment wearing leotards under my mini-pleated skirt.

At first I was shy, I who had danced professionally for ten years. But I did so much want to look beautiful to Joe. Then, after the music started, after only a few phrases, my body became a creature moving by itself. The thinking part of me stopped and nothing was left but fluid movement, music, release into poetry after being stagnant too long.

Joe's expression, when I stopped, was so different it

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startled me. Intimate, yes. Laughing, no. It was serious, and I could see deeper into his eyes than ever before, as though a closed door within him had swung free.

"My God," he said softly. "My God." Then, still softly, "Honey, it's a damned shame. I'd like to get my hands on the bumble-fingers who let you slip—he'd never let anyone slip again."

He came to me, put his hands on my shoulders, looked deeper into my eyes. Not like Joe, but as though another self he knew nothing about had suddenly taken over. "Ellie, you sure you'll never dance again? I mean, as a star? That you're stuck with teaching, no hope of big time?"

"A choreographer maybe, but I'm not sure I'm that creative. Prima ballerina, no. No, that's out. Only minor roles, and that I won't have."

His eyes began to laugh again. "Then I won't have a lost career on my conscience, too, will I?"

I shook my head. I was curious what he meant by "too," but I didn't want to spoil the thrill of what he implied. Joe and I. Being with him forever, following his lead.

Forever. I liked the thought of that word in connection with Joe. A week or so later I said, "Let's stay in Mexico, Joe. Forever." Already it seemed like forever, in the rainy sweet summer of Guadalajara, a lovely dependable rhythm of sunshine, sleepy rain, and being in love. It never occurred to me to wonder why Joe was there, how he earned his living, if he was rich or poor. He was just Joe, and he loved me.

"Why not?" We were lazing in the pool of my hotel. Joe's voice had the comfortable, suggestive sound that implied he would be kissing me if there weren't all those people around. And he was smiling. But his eyes were not, and the change in them troubled me. Not laughing, not intimate, not anything. Blank, showing nothing, which didn't fit the smile and the voice.

It occurred to me then that for several days Joe's eyes had been like that, gazing at me as though under glass while the smile went on. Involuntarily—not because of any unusual movement or entrance into the pool area—his glance flicked toward the lobby door.

"Joe," I said, "lately you're always watching doors. Why?" I was a little jealous suddenly. "Are you expecting someone?" Was it a woman, perhaps a wife? "Are you afraid of someone?"

He grinned, dived under me

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like a porpoise, grabbed my toes, and bobbed up laughing. "Shall we go dress?"

I got out of the pool like a puppy that's been chastised.

But at dinner, in mid-afternoon the way they eat in Mexico, while we were in a little restaurant tucked beside a plaza, I saw his eyes slide toward the service door, then back toward the entrance as we sat down. So I had to ask again. "Joe, I love you. Everything about you concerns me. Whom are you watching for? Joe, tell me—do you have a wife?"

He smiled like an angel, took my hand in both of his, then reached up and gently tugged a strand of my long hair. "Lady, I thought you had the message. Shut your sweet damn big mouth. Except to say, Joe, I love you. And remember this, Monkey-Face, life can get sad for people who get too nosey."

I didn't say anything. Fought back the tears. Became ever so bright, ever so gay and uncaring.

"Let's go up to my apartment, I want to see you dance," Joe said after dinner. *Yes, Joe. I'll stand on my head if you want me to, Joe.*

We got out of the taxi at Joe's apartment house, walked hand in hand up its curving outside stairway to the upper floor where Joe had a private entrance. It was a flat really. One family below, Joe upstairs. He unlocked the door and I walked in ahead, went to the stereo to select a record. Vaguely I heard Joe walk behind me, go into his bedroom.

PHUTT! Like a stuck cork, a big one, pulled out of a bottle. Only louder. Then another *PHUTT!* For no reason my heartbeat quickened. There was a queer ringing sensation inside my head. I started toward the bedroom and stopped. *Silly. Nosey. Lady, I thought you had the message, mind your own business.*

I put on a record and began swaying, circling lazily to the music. The music swirled around my body, creating unseen levitations, lifting as a sensitive ballet partner does. A joy and a grief. Suddenly tears were on my cheeks, spilling over for all the ballets I would never dance. I wiped at them, ran into the bedroom to have Joe say it didn't matter, that it was better this way, a prima ballerina couldn't stay with Joe forever in Guadalajara.

Joe was kneeling beside the bed, on the side away from me. His face looked gorged, dark, and his eyes when they first looked at me were hard. Their hard expression slipped away, and they became blank.

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"Ellie, go home," he said, almost in a whisper. "I'm not well. I want to rest a while. Go home. Now!"

"Joe, let me call a doctor!" I ran around the bed, toward him. As I rounded the bed's end I saw a face staring up at Joe, contorted, drained, blood bubbling from his mouth. A stranger, still alive, on the floor.

"Idiot! I told you to go home!" Joe rasped.

"We'll have to get a doctor! Joe, what happened? I only want to help, what happened?"

The gorged look drained from Joe's face. He considered me as though he were buying something over a counter. "A burglar," he finally said. "Hiding in the closet. He came out, fast, and took a shot at me. He missed. I didn't."

"The police—we need the police! But first a doctor."

Joe stood up and gazed at the man bubbling on the floor. He might have been surveying a menu wondering what to order. "No need," he said. "He's done for."

Another bloody bubble rose from the wounded man's mouth, trembled, deflated weakly. No other bubble rose to take its place. "See? Done for."

"But we still have to call the police. Explain what happened." I turned and walked into the living room, toward the apartment's entrance. Telephones are uncommon in Guadalajara, Joe didn't have a telephone. I planned to run down the street to a *farmacia*, or find a traffic policeman, something, anything.

As my hand touched the knob of the outside door Joe spoke. "Monkey-Face, turn around."

I turned. Joe stood in the bedroom doorway pointing a snouty revolver at me. It was crazy, unreal, the music from the stereo rising to a crescendo finish, the click of the machine, the sudden silence. "Too bad to spoil that beautiful body of yours. Again," he said casually. "But I will, unless you do exactly as I say."

I should have been frightened. Maybe I was. But all I was conscious of was grief. Joe had become a cold stranger who could sweep any attachment, anyone, out of his way. My head drooped to let my long hair cover my face and hide my tears. No questions. Not a word.

"Waiting for the blow? I figured you'd have more fight than that. Get your head up!"

I looked again at Joe and the snouty revolver.

"No, not scared," he said. "You just kissed a goofy dream goodbye. Monkey-Face, I'd like

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it better if you were scared. Then I could be sure you'd do exactly what I tell you."

He waited for me to speak. I didn't.

"Listen close, Ellie. I can kill you, wipe off the gun, drag you in beside—beside whoever it is. Stick the gun in your hand. Murder and suicide. Love deal. They go for that in Mexico."

"It's your apartment, Joe. Your—girl friend. So they'd know it was double murder. Why not tell the truth? He's a burglar. You protected your life."

"Sounds good," Joe said, with a tight, one-sided smile. "Only thing, when—and *when* in Mexico can be a long time—I walk out exonerated, another bullet will be waiting for me because the first missed. But if I leave now, fast, the ones who sent the bullet by special delivery won't know right away that it did miss. Lady, it so happens you hit the big time when you met me, and I don't mean a ballet production. I don't want the police mixed in. For one reason or another they won't like me. All I want is out of this country without a big-mouthed lady turning in the corpse to hold me back. Because you'll not keep your mouth shut." Contemptuously, "You're a law-abiding citizen."

He motioned me toward the divan. I moved to it and sat down. "Smooth Joe has probably become Joe and Dumbie," he said easily. "Like, fall in love. With a funny Monkey-Face."

I was afraid I knew better, but my heart jumped at the hope.

"So I'm going to be a softie. I'm going to leave. And you'll stay here in the apartment, locked in. When you get out, you can tell them what happened. That we came in, this burglar shot at me, but I got him first. Then I peeled out because I was afraid of the Napoleonic law they hand out in Mexico. Guilty until proved innocent."

"Why don't you just trust me? To give you a few hours' head start?"

The one-sided grin again. "Trust? What's that? Maybe you'd hold off. Maybe not. I figure the minute you're out of this apartment you'll hit the police. Spill it all. You might even tell them I considered leaving your own pretty little dead body beside his. Huh-uh, not Joe. But if you're smart, Ellie, after you get out you'll go back to your hotel, pack, leave for the States. And if you're that smart we might get together again. Not in the States. In Europe. Italy. Yes, I'll head for Rome."

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It was like a ballet, parts being played, moving in a dramatic rhythm of love and deceit. This apartment living room became a queer, awkward stage setting in which the heroine could pirouette to the flame. Perhaps leap away.

I dropped my head so Joe couldn't see my eyes. And asked softly, "Joe, do you really love me?"

"Sure, Ellie. That's my trouble." His voice was taut, straining overimpatience.

"What did you mean by another bullet waiting because the first missed—by 'big time'? If I follow you to Rome I need to know."

"Knock it off! Quit trying to con me!" His voice was harsh. "I'm wasting time." His voice smoothed. "Go ahead, tell the police after I'm gone. Listen, Monkey-Face, meet me in Rome. Like in a month or so. Write to me there, care of American Express, when you're coming, flight number and so on. I'll find you."

"Write to Joe Brandon?" It was hard to keep my voice steady. "Is that your real name?"

"Sure. Write to Joe Brandon. Now I need to pack a few things." He hesitated, the gun loose in his hand, went to the apartment's entrance door and locked it, put the key in his pocket. "Someone might come in." He grinned as he went by, toward the bedroom. "Or someone might run out."

Alone in the living room I looked at the windows. Ornamental iron grilles covered them on the outside. If I broke the glass, what good would that do? Yell? A family fight, a lovers' quarrel, anyone who heard would think. Should I pick up ashtrays, sofa pillows, throw them? At a gun?

Joe came back with a small attaché case in his left hand, the gun still in his right. His face was smooth and smiling. He leaned over and lightly kissed me. "Little *Muy Mona*, for old times' sake, dance for me one more time."

"I—I don't feel like dancing."

"Please. Put the music on."

"You said you've already wasted time. Joe, with the man in there—" Then I whispered, "One more time? I thought we were going to meet. In Rome."

"We are. But that's weeks away." Insistent. "Put the music on!"

Music will cover a muffled shot. Murder and suicide, lots of confusion when discovered, lots of time for a third person to get away.

Nerves crawled over my back as I walked to the stereo. I turned to look at him, forcing a

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smile. And saw his right hand drop to his side. Smiling like an angel, he slipped the revolver into his jacket pocket. As though his mind had telegraphed it I knew for sure. As soon as the record started playing. It would be nicer if I kept my back turned. But one way or another—

"This is the wrong music," I said lightly, and lifted the record from the spindle.

"It's okay. Put it back." His voice was hard. "Play it!"

A faint brush of sound, a hand lightly rubbing against cloth. Joe's hand in Joe's pocket.

I moved the record toward the spindle. Then pirouetted on my left toe and spun the record at Joe's face. The snouty revolver fired toward the kitchen door. Joe stumbled back, his cheek sliced open, blood gushing.

I leaped toward him. My foot kicked hard into his midriff. He fell and I stamped on his right hand, kicked the revolver away. He couldn't have aimed anyway, with blood all over his face. I could see the tip of a white tooth through the gash and its blood.

"Toss me the key," I said. "You need a doctor or you'll bleed to death."

He fumbled at a pocket. Rolled over to get at another one. Then his body, long and strong, jackknifed. He was on his feet, lunging toward me, his face a sheet of blood, his eyes furious. I screamed, not in fright but in sheer cold necessity to rouse someone, to get out of the room. I circled him, grabbed a lamp, yanked its cord from the wall, ready to hit him.

He couldn't talk but his eyes said ugly things. He stumbled to the outside door, unlocked it. I didn't go near him. Even then he might change his mind and grab me.

He slipped through the door's opening. Before I could reach it he had locked it with incredible swiftness. I ran to the front window, watched him weave down the sidewalk, handkerchief at his face. And I was locked inside the apartment with a dead man, a gun, and blood splashed over the room.

Joe? Joe would find a taxi, be taken to the American Hospital, say it was a fight. Get sewn up. Leave. Fly to Italy. *Would it be Italy?*

As for me, once I could rouse someone, I could be months—maybe longer—in a Mexican jail waiting for the case to be sifted into truth.

I felt too numb to scream again. I waited for someone in the apartment below to come up the stairs to discover what

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the noise was about. But I heard no voices, no stirrings from below. Possibly nobody was home. Or, as I thought, a few screams, a man and woman fighting, so what? That's love.

Then I remembered. The dead man had entered Joe's apartment. The front door was the only door. It hadn't been jimmied or Joe would have noticed. There must be another key. On the body.

I went into the bedroom and gazed down at the stranger. There was only one small clean wound. In his chest. I shivered at the thought of touching him. But I did. It only took a few moments. There was a key in his coat pocket.

It fitted the door. Out on the stairs I avoided Joe's blood splashes and walked down to the sidewalk. Turned in the direction opposite to the one in which Joe had turned. Remembered that my purse was still in Joe's living room. Turned back, up the bloody steps, into the living room. Got my purse and the light *rebozo* I had been wearing. Down again into the busy avenue, nobody giving me more than a casual look. Around the corner.

Two blocks away I caught a taxi, went to my hotel, and packed. Sat down and thought. Should I try my meager, stumbling Spanish with the police? And land in a Mexican jail, wound up in Napoleonic law? Would Joe have slipped away already, vanished out of Guadalajara?

That night I took a bus to Mexico City and flew from there to New York . . .

Only an idiot would have kept a tryst in Rome with a lie. If Joe said Rome, he probably meant Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, anyplace but Rome. But there was a chance. He said his mother was Italian.

If I found him I would tell him I hadn't said a word to the police. Just left Mexico hoping somewhere, someday to find him. That I was an ugly-faced idiot who had never been in love before, a Monkey-Face looking for the smooth-talking liar who had made me feel beautiful.

So I was here. In Rome.

I glanced at my wrist watch and was startled to see I had been crossing streets and piazzas, wandering past fountains and buildings, for over two hours. It was late, and I was hungry. Better go back to my *albergo*, try to get some food, and go to bed. Tomorrow be a fool some more. Go ask for Joe Brandon at American Express. Leave a message. Maybe find him. Get shot for sure this time.

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I turned back. To where I didn't know. How many corners had I rounded, how many streets had I crossed?

I went up to a woman pedestrian, told her the name of my *albergo*. She was voluble, but I didn't understand a word she said. I tried again and again, with other late walkers. They couldn't understand me, were polite and pointed anywhere. After a while I began to recognize repetition of store fronts, corners, buildings. I was going in circles.

The streets grew narrower, darker, there were no more pedestrians. It was as though I was all alone in the huge city, now gutted by loneliness. Its emptiness pressed on me. I turned one way, then another. I began to walk fast, faster.

At first there was only the sound of my own heels, light and staccato. Gradually I became aware of another sound, heavier, behind me. So. Someone else out for a walk. He would turn into a doorway, cross a street. Or if he came near enough I could ask directions again. It was a man—the steps were too heavy for a woman.

The other heels picked up tempo, faster. Then a scudding sound. Running.

The crazy idea struck me that it was Joe. I had written to Joe Brandon, in care of American Express, giving the flight number and the date. He had been watching at the airport. Now he was following me. Had waited until we would be alone. Not to kill me—no need any longer, he would know I hadn't told about him. He would put his arms around me again. Say we had finished a nightmare, now we were awake and sensible. Forgive me for cutting his face. With a scarred face, maybe Joe was ugly, too, so we'd be a pair.

The thought was so strong I turned and ran toward the man behind me, my arms outspread.

A street light high above us caught a startled look on the face of a small dark Italian. Then his expression shifted into one of offense, as though somehow I had defrauded him of honor. He spat some word at me, turned and vanished into a twisting alley while I stood crying and calling, "Joe! Joe!"

Lights came on in the apartments above. Heads thrust from windows. "*¡Por favor!* Please! I'm lost! *Perdido!*" Hoping the Spanish words would be close to Italian.

Chatter back and forth among the windows. Screams to families still abed. Soon a skinny boy of fourteen or so came down, smiling shyly. "Anglish. I spik. Go me."

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So now I'm back in my hotel bed. Trying to sleep.

Tomorrow I'll go to American Express. See if Joe left a message.

I won't believe—not yet—that the Joe I read about in the New York newspaper as I flew to Rome is my Joe. The paper didn't say Joe Brandon. It said " 'Smooth Joe' Campolini was shot to death last night in Buffalo by an unknown assailant as he left an airline office after purchasing a ticket to Montreal. After the murder the gunman, wearing a dark suit and a hat low over his eyes, escaped in a waiting sedan. The car vanished before shocked witnesses could notice its license number. The shooting of Campolini is believed to be a gangland killing since underworld rumors have long been surfacing that a 'contract' was out on 'Smooth Joe' . . ."

Joe Campolini. Not Joe Brandon. It was Joe's mother who was Italian. Unless—but I won't believe it. Not my Joe. Not dead.

If there isn't a message from Joe tomorrow, maybe there will be one the next day. Or the next.

I'll just wait here in Rome. Forever.

"Q"

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A carny (no, not corny) story about a man who found what he was looking for . . . yes, sir, some things never change . . .

ONE BORN EVERY MINUTE

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

It was a cool night for the first week in July. So I'd left my suit coat on, but I'd loosened my tie and pushed my Panama onto the back of my head as signs that I was just out to enjoy myself. And that was just what I was doing, strolling down the midway with the sights, sounds, and smells of the carnival swirling around me.

You might not believe it, but the carny is one of the few things that hasn't changed in the last thirty or forty years. The Ferris wheel and carousel could have been the ones I'd ridden when I was a kid more years back than I care to remember. And the posters over the sideshows had the same pictures painted in the same lurid style that you don't see anywhere else in the world. The shows they advertised hadn't changed either. Nor had the crowds jostling around them. They were still the same suckers and marks despite the modern clothes and hairstyles. And there must indeed be one born every minute to bring so many out at one place and at one time.

I picked up a hot dog at a grab stand halfway down the midway, paying for it with a flash of the star I carried in my jacket pocket, and walked along munching it. It had a taste and consistency to match the sawdust underfoot. And that too was something that hadn't changed since I was a boy.

There was a good-sized crowd in front of one stand. And being the curious type, I tossed the last of the hot dog away and went over to see what the attraction was.

It turned out to be an eight-foot-tall redhead bumping and grinding away on the bally with a lot more enthusiasm than talent. Actually, she wasn't *really* eight foot tall, but she sure looked it from down where I was standing. And she was built as if she should have been.

To the left and slightly below her a tall beanpole of a

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man in white shirt, bow tie, and red vest was talking the marks in and doing well at it, too. Spotting me standing alone, he pointed with the bamboo stick he carried. "How 'bout it, dad? Last night of the run, so the lid's off. Drop your inhibitions and see something you never see at home."

When I shook my head, he grinned wickedly. "What's the matter?" he called. "Afraid you'll turn green and curl up?"

Seeing as how that was just a calculated attempt to shame me in if he couldn't get me any other way, I just grinned, allowed that I just might, and continued my stroll down the midway.

I had left the main part of it behind and was just about ready to give up and call it a night when I spotted what I'd been looking for all along.

Again it was the size of the crowd that drew me. This time, though, the attraction wasn't a show. It was a front-end stall housing a variation of the old penny pitch. You know the game. You try to toss a coin—pennies when I was a kid, quarters now—into a numbered saucer. If the coin stays in, you win a prize. Of course, the gimmick is that the saucers, particularly the ones offering the top prizes, are shaped and slicked up so that a coin just naturally slips right on out. Still, if you're real careful and toss the coin so that it lands straight down with just the right amount of pressure and no forward or sideways motion left on it, you just might win a prize worth maybe one-tenth of what you've spent. And that was what made the game technically a test of skill and therefore legal.

But it wasn't the prizes or the gambling instinct the carny seems to bring out in all of us that was attracting the crowd here tonight. It was the blonde assisting the barker. She wasn't as tall or well endowed as the redhead at the kootch show. But the proportions were the same, and so was the effect she was having on the male customers.

Every time she bent over to retrieve a coin—and she bent over frequently—she showed a generous expanse of thigh and what she had up front threatened to bounce out over her low-cut neckline.

Of course, there was nothing illegal or unusual about using a pretty girl as a come-on. They did it when I was a boy, and they'll be doing it when my grandchildren are grandfathers. What was odd, though, was that the barker was taking too many breaks, turning the operation completely over to her while

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he'd go out back. Each time, too, he'd always sidle up along the stall until he could engage one of the marks in conversation. After which they'd both drift off to the rear, disappear for a few minutes, and then the barker would show up back inside while the local scurried off clutching something in his hand.

My first thought was that the barker must be pushing dope. But then I got a closer look at one of the locals and grinned as I realized what was really happening. The barker was selling a key to the girl's hotel room.

It was one of the oldest cons in history, and it was hard to imagine anybody falling for it in this day and age. But then if nothing else about the carny had changed, why should the dodges the marks always fell for have changed either? And it was a con all right, because when those marks showed up at the hotel after the girl had supposedly gone off duty, all they'd meet would be themselves going up and coming down the stairs.

Still grinning, I watched from the background until I had the pattern down pat. Then I moved forward into the crowd, working my way over to the edge the barker seemed to favor, and waited, making my "admiration" for the girl as noticeable as possible.

And sure enough it wasn't long before a soft voice spoke in my ear, "Hell of a good-looking dame, ain't she?"

I took my eyes off her just long enough to identify him. He was a short ferret-faced man wearing the barker's semi-uniform of vest, white shirt, and bow tie.

"Man," I said, "you sure can say that again. Only good-looking ain't the word for it."

"I know what you mean," the barker said. "So how'd you like to meet her? I mean, *really* meet her?"

I gave him my full attention now. "How would I—you mean you could arrange that?"

"I could," he said and jerked his head for me to follow him around to the back of the joint.

The pitch was the same as ever and I let him run through it all mostly for the sake of hearing it again. Then I handed over the $20 he asked for and accepted a key in return.

"Room 127, Penrose Hotel," he whispered. "Anytime after two A.M."

"That's just what I've been waiting to hear," I said and flashed my star.

I thought he was going to turn all kinds of colors. "Oh, hell," he said. "Just my luck. The fuzz the last night in town."

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"That's right," I said. "Only around here they call me Sheriff. Now let's go."

I pointed with my finger to tell him to precede me back around to the front, and he was an old enough hand to go without any fuss. Of course, at the sight of him so obviously under arrest, the crowd melted away as quickly as butter from a hot knife. And for once in her life the blonde straightened up without even considering the impression she was making on the locals.

"Arnie," she began in a scared voice, "what—"

"Cool it," Arnie said bitterly. "It's just the local fuzz taking us in. Unless—" His eyes shifted to me. "Unless, of course, we can work out some kind of mutually satisfactory arrangement."

"If you're trying to bribe me, forget it," I said. "Although I am going to do you a favor."

Arnie eyed me suspiciously. "What kind of a favor?" he said.

"Well," I said, "we do things a little differently here than in the big cities. We're a little more interested in justice than in legal technicalities. So I'll give you your choice: you two can spend the next month in our local jail or you can buy back all those keys you sold tonight."

"Some choice," Arnie said, his voice bitter again. "There isn't a chance in hell we'd ever round up all those marks again."

"Sure we would," I said cheerfully. "You just leave that to me." Then I added to the girl in a more businesslike tone, "All right, blondie. Get the cash box and let's go."

"Where?" Arnie said.

"Why, to Room 127 of the Penrose Hotel," I said. "That's where all your marks are going to show up, isn't it?"

Room 127 actually was registered in the blonde's name and probably was where she'd been staying. But now the room was as clean of her possessions as a hound's tooth. Because, of course, they'd planned to skip out tonight as soon as they'd taken in all they could.

I sat them down on the edge of the bed and stationed myself beside the door to wait. The first mark showed up at precisely 2:01. I opened up as soon as I heard his key scratching in the lock, because that key wasn't going to unlock anything and I didn't want him to go away mad.

He was a paunchy man in his mid-fifties with farmer written all over him and he stood in the doorway blinking nervously at the three of us. I showed him

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my star to reassure him, drew him into the room, gave him a quick rundown on just what a fool he'd been, and handed him his $20 back. His ears turned a dull angry red as I spoke.

"Why, those dirty—" he said, looking hard at Arnie and the blonde. "I hope they rot in jail."

"Oh, they will," I said, taking out my notebook and pencil. "But first I'll just need your name and address."

"What?" he said, blinking again. "What for?"

"Why, for the trial," I said. "You'll have to testify, of course."

"What?" he yelled. "You mean get up there in front of my wife and—" He shook his head. "No, sir," he said. "Not me."

"I'm afraid you don't have any choice," I said firmly.

"Now, look," he said, getting desperate, "you don't *really* need me. What I mean is, you said there'd be others. Let them testify."

I hesitated, then shook my head. "Sorry," I said. "I couldn't take the chance."

"What chance?" he said. "I wouldn't say anything." He scrabbled in his hip pocket for his wallet and thrust the $20 into my hands. "So you just take that back and forget you ever saw me." And with that he bolted through the door.

I let him go. As he said, there'd be others, a long line of them, judging from the way Arnie had been working while I watched—and unless I missed my guess a profitable line, too. Because, of course, no one in his right mind was going to get up in front of his family and neighbors and confess that he was both a fool *and* a dirty old man.

Arnie looked up at me sourly. "You had this all psyched out from the start, didn't you, fuzz?" he said.

"That's right," I said. "And if you and blondie mind your manners, I might even let you keep enough to pay your way to the next town."

Then another key scratched in the lock and, smiling, I reached for the doorknob.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short-short by

AVRAM DAVIDSON

"If you could press a button and kill a man . . . whose death would make you rich, would you do it?"

And Guy's heart cried out . . .

MURDER IS MURDER

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

Guy Benson used to tell himself that if Cousin May had never borrowed the book from the library he would never have got the idea. But all the same he rather thought it would have come to him anyway. The need was constant, the solution so easy—and so near.

"So, Guy," Cousin May had said, in that deep voice to which authority, amusement, and scorn seemed to come quite naturally; "so, Guy, you agree with that wretched fellow in the book, do you?"

Guy passed a hand through gray-blond hair, thinning fast now. "In the theoretical discussion, yes—but not in the brutal murder of the old miser, no."

May boomed at him: "But what is the difference?" She waved the library copy of *Crime and Punishment*. In the chair by the marble-topped fireplace Cousin Jenny pouted. She never liked conversations to grow loud and excited. It disturbed her. Even now, in fact, her soft little hands fluttered nervously toward the tray on the tiny table next to her.

"What is the difference between them?" Cousin May demanded. "The theoretical question—if you could press a button and kill a man whom you have never seen, but whose death would make you rich—"

Cousin Jenny quavered, "Oh, please! *Don't* talk about such things." The coal fire in the grate cast glints of ruddy light on the small but richly furnished room.

"—presents no moral issue at all different from bludgeoning

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to death an old miser for the money hidden in a trunk," Cousin May trumpeted, ignoring Cousin Jenny. "Murder is murder."

Guy disagreed. "Murder is as murder feels," was how he put it. "Violent killing would *feel* like murder. But pressing a button would *not* feel like it. And besides, all men must die. My man dies painlessly. Think what later agonies my simply pressing a button may well have saved him."

In her fluty voice Cousin Jenny said, "Oh, *such* a morbid conversation. May, dear, *would* you mind?—some fresh water, please. This in the jug is stale and tepid. Little bubbles, you know. . ." Her voice died away.

Cousin May shifted her heavy face to where Cousin Jenny sat, a little vial in one thin hand, an empty glass in the other.

"Another one of your capsules," she snorted.

"I *need* it," said Jenny staunchly.

"Capsules, pills, powders, injections, diathermy—every doctor in the city has gone to Florida at least twice on what he's gotten from you." May's voice dwindled away into the kitchen, from which a sound of running water came, then grew louder as she returned with a wet-glistening tumbler. "Your heart, your head, your nerves, your enzymes—oh, well. Here you are. Drink it down. No use *my* doing any more talking."

But she continued to talk as capsule and water rippled their way down Cousin Jenny's throat, now beginning to grow thin as the years went on—and on—and on.

Guy thought of all those years, and all the money spent on doctors by Cousin Jenny in those years, and then one single sentence of Cousin May's broke through his bubble-thoughts.

"These sickly fancies of yours will be the death of you yet," said Cousin May.

That was five years ago. Five years in which Guy's position in the world (which had never been too good) had got steadily worse. The three-room apartment had given way to one room, without bath, in a decayed lodginghouse. The truth was that Guy gambled. And his luck was bad. Someday, he assured himself, his cards would turn, his number would come up at the wheel, his stock, his horses—but in the meanwhile he lived in a cheap little room and six days a week ate scanty meals.

But Sunday night he dined at Cousin Jenny's.

The candlelight, the embroidered linen, the savory

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soup, the rich brown-glazed fowl, the roast, the multitude of smaller (though by no means small) dishes moving round the table—curried this, candied that, stewed something, buttered something else. Dessert. Delicious pastries. Coffee with rum in it. Then, in the small front room there were brandy and Turkish cigarettes, while the coal fire glimmered on the polished furniture, golden picture frames, and leatherbound books.

Once at such a moment there had come to Guy's mind a phrase from the Bible—he supposed it must be from the Bible—perhaps he had heard it in church in those dim, far-off days when he had still gone to church: *Hast thou slain and also taken possession?*

The money had all been made by their common grandfather, but Guy's father had lost much of his share, and Guy had lost the rest. Cousin May's income, though small, was sufficient, since she lived with Cousin Jenny, whose own father had not only retained all he inherited, but actually had increased it.

About money Cousin Jenny seldom spoke, but Guy knew that she had two fixed ideas on the subject: one, money should not be given to young people (young people!—he was five years her junior) because "it was bad for their character and better for them to stand on their own feet"; two, family money should be "left in the family."

Aside from a few small charitable bequests all Cousin Jenny's estate would go to Guy and May. That is, when she died. But year succeeded year and she continued to ail, to consume capsules, pills, powders, before meals, after meals, on retiring at night, and on awakening in the morning. She made the rounds from one expensive doctor to another and she never—so far as Guy could see—grew any iller, or feebler, or looked any worse. *If you could press a button and kill. . .whose death would make you rich, would you do it?*

And Guy's heart cried out, "Yes, yes, I would!"

He had had the "button" for two years now. Soon after he had moved to his present room, a medical student, expelled for drunkenness, had killed himself in the dingy lodginghouse. Guy, summoned by the worried landlady into the dark hall smelling eternally of boiled cabbage and cheap bacon, broke down the door. The body was on the bed, the box was on the table by the bed, and in the box were two tiny white tablets.

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When the police arrived there was only one tablet in the box. The other was in Guy's shirt pocket. For two long years, wrapped in a screw of paper tucked into an old sock, it had lain in a corner of a drawer in his rickety bureau.

Guy had approached Cousin Jenny's house from the rear, to avoid any possibility of being seen on the street. He was now at the back door, key in hand. He had the key lawfully: it had been given him to come and check the house during the ladies' annual vacation ("Just to see that everything was in order"), and he had retained it at their request ("Just in case you ever need it").

There was no chance of his being heard as he walked stealthily into the darkened house, for Cousin May slept so soundly by nature that firebells could not awaken her, and Cousin Jenny always (naturally) "took something" to make her sleep. And if by one chance in 10,000 someone *did* awaken and ask why he was there—"I felt a presentiment. I had to see if everything was all right."

Jenny would marvel and accept, and May would snort, but no more than usually.

It was all so easy, as easy as pressing a button: alongside Cousin Jenny's bed stood her night table with its tray of medical supplies; on the tray was a small saucer in which she put the large capsule she would take on waking up in the morning. Guy knew the capsules were not sealed, for once he had heard her complain that one had opened and spilled. It would be necessary for him only to pull off the top cap, insert the tiny tablet, close the capsule, and replace it; then—as silently as he had entered—leave.

I should have done this years ago, he thought, entering the hall. Somehow he did not feel so calm, so cool, now that he was inside. His breath came harder, his heart beat faster, and there seemed to be not enough air. To his surprise he found his legs trembling.

This will never do, he thought. In the hall his eyes made out the shape of a chair. I will sit down for a moment, and rest, he said to himself, just for a moment, until I feel better—

Next morning at nine o'clock a canary-colored taxicab stopped in front of the house and let out Cousin May and Cousin Jenny, each with a suitcase.

"Oh, I *knew* he'd be late," said Cousin Jenny petulantly. "Well, I won't enter the house until he comes."

"Now, you have only your-

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self to blame," said Cousin May. "*I* never heard anything, never saw anything. Such a nuisance, staying in that hotel. I hope you'll have no more notions like this one, Jenny."

Jenny moved from one grievance to the other. "But I *did* hear them, May," she protested, wide-eyed and pouting. "I really did—rustling noises at night, in the walls, in the woodwork, in the hall. Insects, mice—why, perhaps even rats!" She shuddered.

May shrugged, looked at her watch.

"Where *is* that man from Wilson's?" she asked. "He's five minutes' late." She walked down the steps to peer both ways along the street, Jenny following.

"Curb your imagination, Jenny," May's voice ran on. "Beware of these sickly fancies or they will be the death of you yet."

Behind them, on the front door, was a sign with large red letters. In each of its four corners was a skull and crossbones.

Danger, the sign read. *Do Not Enter. Poison Gas. Rats. Wilson Pest Control Service.*

Inside the house all was silent.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

an ALL-NEW issue

17 NEW stories — including

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a NEW Interpol story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Sebastian Blue, former Scotland Yard Inspector, and Laura Charme, expert Interpol translator, team up again, this time in the adventure-mystery involving the tangled web of the November Club . . .

In a recent article in Stanley Gibbons' "Stamp Monthly," Interpol was referred to as "the world-famous crime-fighting organization." Interpol, the article went on, "has a reputation for being a supra-national police force, but it is nothing of the kind. When founded in 1923 it started on its basic job of transmitting messages and keeping archives for what now numbers 150 countries. It specializes today, with its staff of 120, in the areas of narcotics, counterfeiting, and locating known criminals."

Perhaps Sebastian Blue and Laura Charme are expanding Interpol's official duties and activities. Devotees of fiction (including your Editor) will raise no serious objection. We have long believed that truth is often stranger than fiction; but that even more often fiction is stranger than fact—and more interesting . . .

INTERPOL: The Case of the November Club

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The tiny plane seemed to hang suspended against the blue cloudless sky, and from the ground it was difficult to imagine it as anything more than a random bird seeking some shelter. On board the plane, which bore the single word *November* on its silver fuselage, the view was somewhat different. A wide door in the side of the aircraft opened directly onto the sky, allowing a stream of chill upper air to

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crowd in on those who were huddled there.

But none of the five showed the slightest discomfort at their surroundings. They were more concerned with the bulky parachutes they wore front and back, and with the helmets that covered their heads and were buckled beneath their chins.

Presently, as the twin-engined plane reached a predetermined position above the rolling green countryside, the pilot spoke to them in a crackling voice over the loudspeaker. The first of the five nodded, checked his parachutes one last time, and stepped to the open door. In a second the figure was gone, tumbling toward the earth. The next followed, and then the third.

But as the fourth of the jumpers poised in the doorway for his plunge, the last one came up behind him very quickly. There was a moment almost too fast to follow, a judo chop to the neck, and the victim began to sag to the floor. The fifth person gave the body of the fourth a nudge and watched it follow the others.

Then, when the fifth was certain only three parachutes had opened below he stepped into space and yanked the ripcord.

Sebastian Blue had not seen Laura Charme since the affair of the third apostle, and he was beginning to doubt they'd be working together again soon. That was why he experienced a special delight when he entered the Secretary-General's office on the top floor of Interpol headquarters and saw Laura sitting in one of the room's four chairs.

"Good to see you again, Sebastian," the balding man said, rising to shake his hand. "I imagine these first few weeks have been somewhat boring for you, but it's the season for international conventions, and I've had to be away a great deal." He spoke English with a decided accent, and Sebastian suspected he would have preferred his native French.

"That's perfectly all right, sir. I've kept busy going over the files of past Interpol cases. They make fascinating reading."

The Secretary-General nodded. "Of course you know Miss Charme here," he said, in a formal continental manner that implied they might have passed each other in the hall. He was not a man to allude to anyone's past triumphs.

"We know each other very well," Sebastian countered with improper British directness. "She was a great help to me in Istanbul."

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"Yes." His eyes dropped to the desk and he shuffled through a stack of papers. "I seem to remember a request that the two of you work as a team on future assignments."

Laura Charme cleared her throat and spoke for the first time since Sebastian had entered. "It was only a suggestion, based on our prior success together. Of course the decision is yours."

The Secretary-General raised his eyes slightly. "Thank you for that, my dear. But yes—I believe there is another case which could make use of your dual talents. Has either of you ever parachuted from an airplane?"

Sebastian had a sudden vision of French resistance fighters being dropped behind German lines. But that was 30 years ago, when he was barely old enough to join the army for the final days of the fighting. Surprisingly, it was Laura who answered.

"I've done a bit of it," she admitted. "But surely that must be in my file."

The balding man grunted. "You might get to do a great deal more on this case. Have you ever heard of the November Club?"

"The skydiving group? I believe I've seen their advertisements from time to time."

"It's new to me," Sebastian Blue admitted. "What about them?"

"As Miss Charme says, they're a skydiving club, with chapters in several countries of western Europe. The man who hijacked the plane between Paris and Berlin last month, and parachuted to earth with £50,000 in ransom money, was a member of the November Club."

"He was caught, wasn't he?"

The Secretary-General nodded. "By the West German police. But Interpol was asked to look into the club. It seems a previous plane hijacker had also been a member. I needn't tell you both that the skyjacking of commercial airliners is one of the most serious problems we face these days. If there's a possibility these people are being trained and controlled by a central intelligence, we have to know about it."

"I was under the impression that most of them were mentally unbalanced individuals seeking a moment of twisted fame."

"That was true at the beginning, certainly. The skyjackings were either political or irrational in nature. But lately, with these ever-increasing ransom demands and parachutings from planes, there's evidence of other motives. We've been in

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touch with the United States on the matter, and there's a possibility one or more of their skyjackers also trained at skydiving in Europe. I assigned Martin Lange to the case last month and he immediately came up with a strange fact about the November Club."

"I've heard talk about some of their weekend parties," Laura volunteered.

"Nothing like that. I'm referring to the frequency of fatal accidents among members. During the past two years fifteen November Club members have been killed in falls from airplanes. Either their parachutes were defective or they weren't opened. Now skydiving is not a sport without its perils, but fifteen deaths out of a membership of a few hundred seems unusually high."

"Were all the deaths in the same area?" Sebastian asked.

"No, and that's how they've escaped attention until now. No single chapter of the November Club has had more than three fatalities, and some have experienced only one."

"You think it's tied in with the plane hijackings somehow?"

"That's what I sent Lange to investigate. He enrolled as a member to get a view of the club from the inside. I want Miss Charme to do likewise, while you conduct a more open investigation. My hope is that you'll scare them into making a rash move that Miss Charme can detect."

Sebastian nodded in agreement. "Sounds like a workable scheme. And once she's accepted, she can contact Lange for assistance if necessary."

The Secretary-General lowered his eyes. "I'm afraid any contact with Martin Lange is out of the question. He was killed in a fall from one of their planes yesterday. His parachute didn't open."

Sebastian Blue was gray-haired and middle-aged, with a pouch around his middle that no amount of exercise seemed able to reduce. He'd been a Scotland Yard Inspector until his wife divorced him to marry a fellow officer. That was when he'd left the Yard and come to Interpol. It was something in the nature of a new life, but he'd never imagined it would include anyone as charming as Laura. She was herself a victim of tragedy, with a husband killed in the Algerian war and a father she hardly knew. But her good looks and natural intelligence had carried her through. A French-English parentage, plus a natural affinity for languages, had made her an expert translator. It was a skill that served her well.

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Sebastian left the Paris headquarters of the International Criminal Police Organization exactly one week after Laura Charme's departure. He traveled by plane to Rome, and then north by car to the city of Lucca, west of Florence. It was on the outskirts of Lucca that the November Club maintained its world headquarters, a rambling old estate with a small airfield nearby. Martin Lange had died here, and Laura had come here to join the skydiving club.

He saw her at a distance as he drove up to the entrance, sitting with another young woman and two men on the stone porch of the main house. The spring weather was warmer here than in Paris, and both women wore white shorts and blue zippered jackets with some sort of emblem on the back. The men, in short-sleeved sports shirts, seemed properly handsome and European. With a twinge of jealousy Sebastian hoped Laura wasn't enjoying herself too much.

He was ushered almost immediately into the company of Hans Pelfer, president of the club. Pelfer was a deeply tanned, wiry man of about Sebastian's age, who moved about with the light-footed sureness of a much younger person. He immediately welcomed Sebastian and poured him a glass of wine.

"A visitor from Interpol is indeed someone special," he said. "I didn't realize the International Criminal Police Organization employed its own force of detectives."

"I'm hardly a detective," Sebastian said. "As you must know, our main effort is in cooperation between member nations—especially in the fields of identification, research, and international crime."

"Then you're a researcher!" Pelfer exclaimed with a chuckle. He was not the sort to be rattled by a visit from Interpol.

"In a sense. What brings me here is the death last week of a Frenchman named Martin Lange. I believe he fell from one of your planes."

"A tragic accident, but it was his first jump. It seems he never released his parachute. We have rare instances of people freezing up through fear."

"Lange was in the employ of Interpol. He was conducting an investigation into airplane hijackings."

Hans Pelfer didn't chuckle this time. "But what brought him here?"

"There are reports that one or more recent plane hijackers might have been members of the November Club."

"That's very possible. We are

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the largest skydiving society in Europe, with chapters in eleven countries. If these criminals who parachute from planes have been trained in jumping or skydiving they must either be former members of the armed forces or club affiliates. It is not surprising that the affiliation of some would be with the November Club."

"Could you tell me more about your group? For one thing, what does the name mean?"

The wiry man gave another chuckle. "I am always asked that! It was simply a name that came to me. After all, November is the month when birds fly south, when beasts are slaughtered for winter food, when fishermen draw their boats ashore till spring. *No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds!—November!* That's Thomas Hood, written in 1844."

"I didn't think anyone quoted Thomas Hood these days."

"No? *I saw old Autumn in the misty morn . . .* As you might guess, Nineteenth Century English literature is something of a hobby with me. If you have time during your visit I will show you my quite extensive collection of the period. As an Englishman you should be interested."

"I am. But you were telling me about the November Club—"

"My mind wanders," Pelfer said. "November. I felt we were replacing the birds that had gone, filling the skies with a new kind of flight. Also, of course, November is one of the few months which is spelled exactly the same in both German and English. As a German myself, I felt this was an important consideration. In German we are Klub November."

"And its purpose?"

Hans Pelfer shrugged. "The sport, companionship, new acquaintances. We are as much social as sporting."

"Clubs like this have a reputation for another 's'—sex."

The German waved his hand. "One may find sex anywhere these days. The club does nothing to encourage it."

"Who made the jump with Lange last week?"

"I was there myself, since it was a new group. But I was the first one out of the plane, so I can't tell you the order of jumping after that. There were five of us in all—myself, Lange, Hugo Belson, Peter Tandrais, and Helen Faine."

"A woman?"

"Certainly. We have many women members, as you have already implied. But they are out jumping with the men, not

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waiting back at the bar."

"I'll want to talk with the others."

"I believe they were on the porch when you arrived, with one of our new members."

Sebastian had to smile inwardly. He should have known Laura would quickly make friends with the possible suspects. "One other thing before I leave you," he said. "Our reports show an alarmingly high accident rate among the November Club members. Fifteen in two years—sixteen if we include Lange."

Hans Pelfer waved away the words. "These things run in streaks."

"Is there any sort of insurance policy payable to the club in case of accident?"

"Certainly not! We hardly go about pushing our members from airplanes, if that's what you mean. We carry standard liability insurance and nothing more."

"Very well," Sebastian said. "I'd like to meet the others now if I could."

"I might remind you that the local police completed their investigation without finding anything questionable."

"And I'll no doubt do likewise. But I must go through the motions, you know."

Pelfer nodded and led him back to the porch. There were a few other people around, mostly younger than the German and with the sun-touched ruggedness of those who spend their lives outdoors. But Pelfer led him at once to the table where Laura was engaged in a conversation with the other three. The woman had risen to leave, and she paused as they approached.

"Helen, this is Sebastian Blue from the International Criminal Police Organization in Paris. Mr. Blue, may I present Helen Faine, one of our most skilled skydivers. And a newcomer, Laura Charme. And the gentlemen, Hugo Belson and Peter Tandrais."

The men rose to shake hands. Belson had a dour Teutonic look about him that hinted at dark deeds with women and empires. Tandrais was a youthful blond man who could have been Scandinavian.

"What brings an Interpol man to the November Club?" Helen Faine asked in English. She was about Laura's height, but older and harder. Her eyes flickered with suspicion as she faced Sebastian.

"The death of Martin Lange," he answered frankly. "I understand you all made the jump with him."

"All but Miss Charme," Tandrais said. "She is new to the club." He spoke English,

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too, but with a thick accent Sebastian could not identify.

"I'm trying to determine who was the last to jump."

Helen Faine spoke up. "Lange was. We were all out of the plane before him."

"Wasn't that unusual, with a new member?"

"He had jumped before," she answered with a shrug.

Sebastian turned his attention to the men. "Can either of you add anything?"

Peter Tandrais shook his head, and the German Belson simply looked blank. He obviously understood no English. Laura spoke to him, translating, and he answered in a deep guttural voice.

"No," she told Sebastian. "He had only just met Lange on the day he died."

"Well," Sebastian said, turning back to Hans Pelfer, "it begins to appear that my trip was for nothing."

The older man nodded. "It was an unfortunate accident, nothing more."

"But join us for a drink," Tandrais suggested. "Have you ever done any skydiving?"

"I'm too old for that," Sebastian said, lowering himself into an empty chair.

"Nonsense!" Pelfer snorted. "We could get you up there and teach you in one day."

"Somehow I think I'd rather stay on the ground," he said, and caught a glance that passed between Hugo Belson and Helen Faine. Perhaps the dour German did understand English.

Sometime later, after the group on the porch had split up and Pelfer had gone out to the airfield with a class of new jumpers, Sebastian arranged to meet Laura on a wooded path that was well hidden from the main house. She'd changed into a trim red blazer that he liked. "How's it going?" he asked. "They had you up for a jump yet?"

She shook her head. "Mostly ground practise so far, learning how to tumble. But it's everything I heard. Tandrais invited me to his room last night."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. "Did you go?"

"I went, but when things started getting serious I pretended I was ill and left. Peter looked crestfallen, but I promised to make it up to him."

Sebastian grunted. "What have you learned?"

"There are wild parties and some narcotics, but mainly there's just skydiving. Pelfer runs the whole thing quite efficiently, and he winks at the after-hours activities."

"What about Lange?"

"I'm sure he wasn't killed

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because of some wild parties."

"Why, then?"

She gazed up through the trees, tensing at some unfamiliar sound that proved to be an errant dog sniffing through the tangled underbrush. "That German, Hugo Belson, is hiding something. He's not what he seems."

"I got the same impression."

"For one thing, I think he understands English but won't admit it. For another, he claims he came from Munich, but he didn't."

"How could you know that?"

She grinned at him. "Remember, languages are my specialty. He uses the German word *Sonnabend* for Saturday—something that's done only in the northern part of the country. In the south, around Munich, the word for Saturday is *Samstag.*"

"Why would he lie about the part of Germany he comes from?"

"The north could include East Germany. He could be in the pay of the Russians."

"Doing what? Spying on wild parties?"

She shrugged. "What about you? Have you found anything linking the fifteen who died before Lange?"

"Not a thing. Of course it's possible they all discovered the skyjacking connection and had to be killed, but that seems highly unlikely. There were twelve men and three women among the victims. Two were Americans, the rest were Europeans—Germans, French, English, Swedish, Italian. Most were middle-aged or older."

"That just proves it's not a safe sport for middle-aged people."

"I suppose so," Sebastian grinned.

"What about insurance or large inheritances?"

"Most of them had insurance, of course. But there were more rich victims than poor ones. And as near as I can tell, the club profited in no way from the deaths. In fact, it could be argued that the club lost them as future members and thereby suffered a financial setback."

"Well," she asked, "do you want me to keep on here?"

He nodded. "My appearance today just might start something. What about that woman, Helen Faine? Is she friendly with Belson?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I saw them exchange glances when I declined to go skydiving."

"I'll keep an eye on her. I'd better get back now before somebody sees us together."

Sebastian agreed. "What

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about Lange? Do you believe he was the last one out of the plane?"

"They all tell the same story. Was the parachute defective?"

He shook his head. "I checked the local police on that. The parachute was fine, and so was the emergency one. He just never pulled the ripcord. Makes one think something happened to him before he jumped."

"Could the pilot have done it? Set the plane on automatic control and come back to slug him?"

"Doubtful in that sort of plane. It's more likely someone is lying."

"If one's lying, they're all lying."

"Maybe."

They had reached the clearing that led to the big house. Sebastian stayed behind and let her go in alone. She made a pleasing sight in her tight white shorts and red blazer, and as he watched her he saw that someone else was watching too. The blond man, Peter Tandrais, was standing on the porch, perhaps dreaming of another visit by Laura to his room.

She smiled at Peter as she mounted the steps. "Have the others gone?"

"Who cares about the others? Where have you been, Laura?"

"My, you're so possessive today! I was just out for a walk."

"With Belson?"

"Of course not."

That seemed to satisfy him. "You have to watch Belson. There's something not quite right about him."

She fell into step beside the blond man. "In what way?"

"He's done some odd things. Paid the pilot to change the route a couple of weeks ago and damn near killed us all."

"Was that the day Lange died?"

"No. The week before."

"Why would he want to change the route?"

"Who knows?" He lit a long Russian cigarette. "Are you jumping with us tomorrow?"

Laura hesitated only an instant. "Of course. Will Belson and Helen be coming, too?"

"I think so."

"Pelfer?"

"No, not him. He has to spread himself around."

"I'll be there," she promised.

At the door he took her arm. "There's to be another party tonight, in my room."

"I'm sorry, Peter, but I really must rest up for the morning. I haven't jumped in over a year. Perhaps another time."

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Her smile must have convinced him. He nodded and smiled in return. "I hope so."

As the old twin-engined Lodestar taxied up to the hangar Sebastian Blue strolled over to meet it. The president of the November Club was the first one out of the aircraft, and he unbuckled his parachute while he walked. "Hello, Mr. Blue. I thought you'd be gone by now."

"I wanted to look at that library of yours. You promised me, remember?"

"Ah, so I did!" Without the bulkiness of the parachutes Hans Pelfer was reduced to the wiry little man Sebastian had first met. He hurried along, ridding himself of the last of the straps.

Sebastian gestured back at the silver aircraft with its November insignia on the fuselage. "That's an old one, isn't it?"

"Built during the Second World War, though this is an improved version. A commercial transport plane, originally, until the Americans converted it to military use to convey parachute troops for the Netherlands East Indies government. It's perfect for the November Club. The newer jets are too fast for skydiving."

He led the way into the main building, past the little office, and into a wing of the house obviously reserved for his living quarters. "You live here alone?" Sebastian asked.

"Alone at present. There have been wives in the past, but now I am married to the November Club. I feel I am performing a service of sorts."

"And you are." The rooms they passed through were tastefully decorated in the manner of some midcentury movie set. Sebastian had seen homes like this in England, and he had always wondered about the people who lived in them.

"This is my library," Pelfer announced, throwing open double oak doors. The room was impressive, with bookshelves running from floor to ceiling on all sides. Sebastian glanced over the fat tomes of Dickens and the slim volumes of Rossetti, the novels of Hardy and the poems of Byron.

"Quite impressive," Sebastian murmured.

"They're all arranged alphabetically by author, and they're all Nineteenth Century British literature. I haven't overlooked anyone. Next to the club this collection is my ruling passion."

"The Nineteenth Century was a time of giants," Sebastian agreed. He ran his fingers over the books, seeing the names of Scott and Shelley, seeing—

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somewhat incongruously—a copy of Stanley's *How I Found Livingstone* next to Stoker's *Dracula.*

"Stanley was an American," Sebastian commented.

"No, no! That is a common mistake. He was born in Wales and died in London. But he was adopted by Americans at the age of eighteen."

"You really know English literature. It's something for which we rarely have time at Interpol."

"Reading and collecting relax me."

Sebastian studied the shelves a moment longer, as if searching for a favorite title. At last he turned and said, "It is a pleasant room."

"You have concluded your investigation?"

"This phase of it. We are still bothered by the number of accidents the November Club has suffered. But perhaps the answer to that lies elsewhere. I may visit some of your chapters in other countries."

"Do whatever you feel necessary."

Sebastian paused at the outer door. "One more question, if you don't mind. Did you know the skyjacker who was arrested last month after parachuting from the Berlin plane?"

"As I told you, it is perfectly logical for such people to have belonged to our club. But no, I did not know him. I believe he was a member of one of the French chapters."

Sebastian left the man in the doorway and went down the steps to his car. It was time to depart, even though he had no intention of going very far.

In the morning Laura Charme was up early, breakfasting with others who would be jumping that day. Clad in her sleek white jumpsuit and seated across the table from Helen Faine, she could almost believe the role she was playing.

"Where did you learn to jump?" Helen asked, sipping a cup of espresso that had been too strong for Laura at this early hour.

"Near Paris. That is my home, really, although my mother was English."

Helen leaned back in her chair. "I find a wonderful freedom in skydiving. It has a sort of hypnotic quality that links me with birds in flight."

"Could that hypnotic quality have caused all those accidents to club members?" Laura wondered aloud. "Do you think it might be similar to the rapture of the deep that some divers say they experience beneath the water? A sort of rapture that keeps them from

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pulling the ripcord?"

Peter Tandrais had overheard her words. "Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "I've heard about those accidents, and I've looked into them. In almost every case the victim was a new, inexperienced jumper. They simply panicked, or pulled the wrong strap. There is nothing inherently dangerous in the sport."

"I'm glad to hear that," Laura said.

Hugo Belson appeared in the doorway lugging his parachute. It was obviously time to go. Laura followed the others out of the dining room, wondering if she'd just eaten her last meal.

Pelfer was on the landing strip to see them off in the twin-engined Lodestar. He wished them a good flight and gave the pilot the latest weather report. "I would like to be with you, but I have too much paperwork to finish."

"He rarely jumps any more," Helen explained as the plane taxied down the runway. "Even when he goes up, it's usually just to watch."

"He doesn't need to, with the dues he's getting from members."

"It is a popular club," she agreed. "And not just for the obvious reasons."

Laura remembered the wild parties and wondered if Helen had been a part of them, perhaps with the German. Glancing around, she observed that Belson was missing. Then she saw him step out from the cockpit, closing the door behind him. She thought he nodded slightly to Helen.

The plane had been airborne about ten minutes when Tandrais seemed to grow uneasy. "Are we on the right course, Hugo?" he asked in German.

Belson replied that they were and signaled preparation for the jump. Laura checked over her straps, still not certain if she'd have the nerve to go through with it.

Peter Tandrais jumped first, and she watched him fall like a stone toward the green pool of earth. Her heart seemed to stop until she saw at last the white blossom of his parachute. "You go next," Helen told her.

She turned and saw for the first time the expensive German camera in Belson's hands. "What's that for?" Laura asked.

"Take pictures on the way down," he replied in German.

"With a telescopic lens? You'll be shooting at the ground then, won't you?" Suddenly it all became clear to her. "And you had the pilot alter the course again."

Belson seemed frightened, and his eyes went to Helen. "She knows. Do something with her."

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"What?"

He shrugged. "Another accident. Who would notice?"

Laura dodged as the older woman came for her, easily avoiding the reaching hands and countering with a quick judo chop that sent Helen sprawling. Belson was on her then, gripping her in an awkward bear hug as he wrestled her toward the open door of the plane. She had only an instant to react, and she broke the hold with an old judo trick that left the German doubled over and gasping. Then she floored him with a well-aimed knee to the point of his chin.

"No more jumping today," she told them.

Sebastian Blue could only stare at her in admiration as he turned the camera over in his hands. "Just what were they photographing?"

"NATO installations. The airfield north of here, among other things. I remembered reading about a case some years back where an Italian woman and her husband traveled about Europe giving skydiving exhibitions as a cover for flying over and photographing NATO installations. When that pair was caught, the East Germans decided to try the same thing with Hugo and Helen. When Peter told me about Belson bribing the pilot to fly a different route, I suspected he wanted to photograph something."

"I thought the Russians used spy satellites for that sort of thing," Sebastian said.

"The Russians do. But the East Germans maintain their own intelligence operation. Apparently they don't get to see the Russian pictures, so they have to take their own the best way they can."

"You've contacted the local police?"

She nodded. "I have some rolls of film. That should prove what he was up to."

"Somehow I feel left out of this whole thing," Sebastian said.

"There's still something unexplained." She bent to brush a bit of dirt from the leg of her white jumpsuit. "If Hugo and Helen were the only ones in on it, how do we explain all those killings? They might have murdered Lange, but what about the others?"

"I have a theory about that," he said. "I must speak to Hans Pelfer one more time, and then I'll let you know if I'm right."

"Can I come with you?"

"I'd rather you waited outside for the police. They should be here soon."

He left her and entered the

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main house, making his way to the president's office. On the stairs he passed Peter Tandrais who asked, "Have you seen Laura and the others? They didn't jump!"

"Laura's outside. I believe there was a foul-up."

"Oh."

Sebastian entered the office without knocking, taking Pelfer by surprise. The wiry little man looked up, startled. "You again!"

"For the last time, Mr. Pelfer. We have the people we want."

"You mean Belson? The pilot reported to me."

"You should have been on the flight."

"I rarely go."

"And when you go you rarely jump."

"That's correct." But Pelfer's face was beginning to cloud over, like the sky before a summer storm.

"You didn't jump yesterday, when I met you getting off the plane and unstrapping your chute."

"No."

"And yet you did jump the day Martin Lange was killed."

"Yes. Sometimes when I see the others diving down I have an urge to follow."

"But you told me that day you were the first out of the plane. You also said it was a new group, which it wasn't."

"I—"

"The others all said Lange was the last to jump, but they weren't counting you because you weren't supposed to jump. But you had to jump that day—after you killed Lange. Otherwise, if his death aroused suspicion, it would center on you as the last one in the plane. Once you'd jumped, following the others down, no one could say if you'd jumped before or after Lange."

Pelfer wet his lips with a quick, snakelike tongue. "Why should I kill Lange?"

"Because he learned how those fifteen others had died. Possibly because, like me, he wondered about the book missing from your library."

"Book missing? What book?"

Sebastian Blue smiled. "Why, the one that belongs between Stanley and Stoker in any collection of Nineteenth Century English literature. Stanley and Stoker are next to each other on your shelf, and I had to ask myself what happened to a far more important writer than either of them. I mean Robert Louis Stevenson."

"Stevenson?" Pelfer was flustered now. "I believe he's around somewhere—a big volume of his collected works."

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"But there's no space on the shelf for even one book by Stevenson. You couldn't risk Lange or me or anyone else browsing through your collection, seeing an empty space, and getting an idea."

"What idea?"

"Any collected work of Stevenson would surely include his famous series of stories, *The Suicide Club.* And that of course is what the November Club is all about. It's a modern-day Suicide Club."

That was when Hans Pelfer went for his gun, and Laura came through the door with the local police.

The Secretary-General stared across the desk at them, slowly shaking his head. "A suicide club? And Pelfer admitted such a thing?"

Sebastian Blue nodded. "He suffered a flesh wound from a police bullet, but after we patched him up he told us the whole story. Actually, I should have seen it even without the missing book by Stevenson. The victims were mainly older people, mostly with insurance, who'd only just taken up skydiving. They paid Pelfer large fees for the services he supplied—perfect, undetected suicides. No questions from insurance companies, no embarrassed relatives—just a step off into space. Best of all, from the victims' standpoint, there were no bungled attempts. A successful death was assured every time."

"And Lange stumbled on the truth?"

"He did. And to preserve his profitable little business, Pelfer had to kill him. Our mistake was in thinking the other fifteen had been murdered, too. The very name of the group, the November Club, suggests a lateness, a twilight, an autumn of life. I should have thought of suicide immediately. Of course the club also attracted real skydivers like Tandrais, along with spies like Belson and Helen. Pelfer needed the real ones to keep the percentage of deaths as low as possible."

"So simple," the Secretary-General said.

"Or so complex," Laura suggested. "Sometimes I think suicide is the most complex of crimes, because it is a crime against oneself. Do you think Pelfer imagined each of those deaths to be his own?"

Sebastian grunted. "I think he was only interested in his large fees."

Laura turned to him. "You know, we never did get a lead on the skyjackers."

"Perhaps," said the Secretary-General, "that should be your next assignment."

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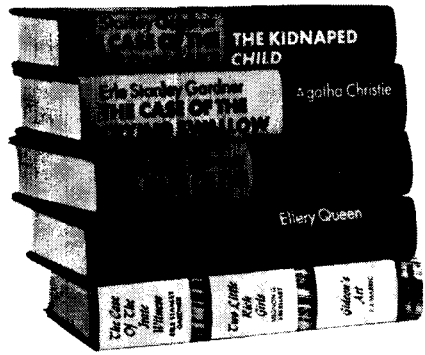

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